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COULD HAVE GONE
MUCH FARTHER.

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EASY. YOU CAN
REST UP AT THE
FIELD CABIN
YONDER.



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WONDERFUL!

WHEN YOU FEEL
UP TO IT, WE'LL
HEAD FOR MY
STATION AND RADIO
TO HEADQUARTERS

Tower Provides
Entrance To Field
Cabin In Deepest
Snow



SHE'S PERFECTLY
OKAY...JUST TIRED.
WE'LL BE DOWN
ABOUT DARK ON
THE SNOW
"CAT"

YOUR
DAUGHTER
IS IN SAFE
HANDS. NELSON'S
ONE OF OUR
BEST MEN



THINK I'LL FRESHEN
UP A BIT WHILE YOU
FINISH THAWING
OUT

PLEASE
DO!



THIN
GILLETTES,
EH? MUST
BE BOB'S



BOB SURE KNOWS
HIS RAZOR BLADES.
THIS THIN GILLETTE
IS PLENTY KEEN AND
EASY SHAVING



...AND NO MORE
MOUNTAIN SKIING
ALONE, YOUNG
LADY

HE'S SO
GOOD
LOOKING!

WILL IT BE
ALL RIGHT IF
MR. NELSON
IS ALONG,
DAD?

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ARE KEENER BY FAR THAN OTHER LOW-
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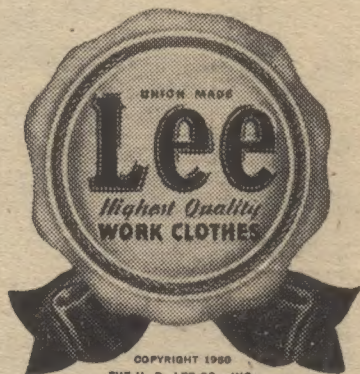
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MAY, 1950

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"I'll take my share of this range today, gents—on the wrong end of a rope... or the right end of a gun!"
2. **DEAD MAN'S JOURNEY**.....*Les Savage, Jr.* 66
With a killing behind him he chose a trail only the quick might travel out—and only the dead ride back!

Short Western Fiction

3. **THE BIG FREEZE**.....*William R. Cox* 32
"I know when I'm licked, gents," Cam Mitchell told them, "but I ain't dead yet—not near as dead as you're gonna be!"
4. **THE DEVIL AT DANCING DUNES**.....*Rod Patterson* 42
It took ten men's brawn to wrest a living out of Dancing Dunes, Johnny knew—but it took pure brains to die!
5. **BIGGER THAN A SIX-GUN**.....*T. C. McClary* 54
"Welcome to Hellstop, stranger... where a man, if he lives, is a devil—but if he dies—he dies like a man!"
6. **THIS RANGE IS MINE!**.....*Edgar Jean Bracco* 82
Only the dead sided Randall when he fought for the law—and he knew that he'd have to win for them—or join them!
7. **BLOOD CALL**.....*Philip Ketchum* 90
Death called Kerrigan to a final showdown—to trade his life and his last bullet... for the life of a man he hated!
8. **WRONG WAY BULLET**.....*Lance Kermit* 106
"Right or wrong, mister—we got law in this town, and dead or alive—you're gonna prove it to us!"
9. **KILLER'S ROAD**.....*Robert J. Hogan* 116
"I took this range by being fast with a gun—and that's how I aim to keep it!"

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Here's this month's herd. Look 'em over and see if you don't agree:

Dear Editor:

The most intemperate "vigilant committee" in the story of California came into existence in Rich Bar camp, on the first Christmas after gold was discovered.

Most of the celebrating miners ended the three-day Yule festivities in a state of drunkenness. Some simply slept in a torpor.

(Continued from page 8)

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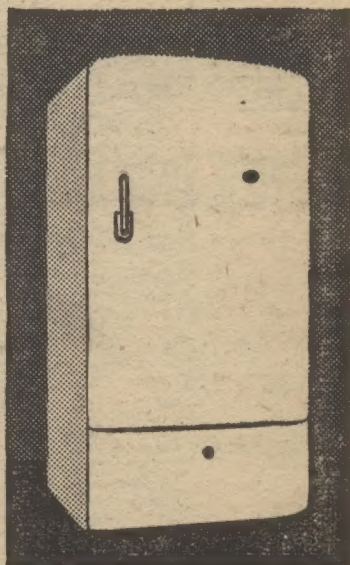


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(Continued from page 6)

Others continued to dance, in steps of their own impromptu invention, and to drink. In honor of the day, there seem to have been few quarrelsome drunks at first, but there were actually a few nonconformists who were discovered to be merely sober again.

It was to bring these incorrigibles back into line that the vigilant committee was formed. Roaming the hills, they rounded up everyone who could walk a straight line and forced him to drink himself normal again.

By this time, unfortunately, the Christmas spirit was tapering off, and the drunken vigilant committee, growing ugly with whiskey, caused as many casualties in the end as a sober one might have.

An equally gaudy, though far less violent, celebration occurred in Leadville, Colorado, in 1895. That year, the town marked the Christmas season by erecting a literal palace of amusement, three hundred twenty-five feet wide and four hundred thirty-three feet long, complete with electricity, heating system, and musician's pavilion, on a purely temporary basis.

Eight towers, averaging sixty feet in height, rose magnificently from the ninety-foot-high roof of the edifice—and as a final touch of town pride, the statue of a woman twenty feet high, entitled symbolically "Leadville" stood in front of the palace on a twenty-foot pedestal.

The fantastic thing about the palace was not, of course, that it was devoted to skating, dancing, wining and dining—although it still was the most fabulous place of that kind in the West.

But the whole structure—statue, towers, walls, pillars, everything but a few trestles in the roof and the actual wiring and heating systems—was made of plain, ordinary ice, doomed to disappear in the first spring thaw.

John Bell
Denver, Colorado

See what we mean? Nothing like a plain old tree with lights would do for a real Westerner. Here's a story now about the linking of the iron rails, just one of the great jobs of the Old West:

Dear Editor:

Tradition has dramatized the first meeting of the Central Pacific with the Union Pacific railroad. It was actually, a tremendous moment in the life of the United States—for this was the first unbroken line of track from sea to sea. They were right to ring the Liberty Bell for a second time when the news reached Philadelphia—and the Chicagoans who formed a seven-mile procession of humanity, parad-

(Continued on page 10)

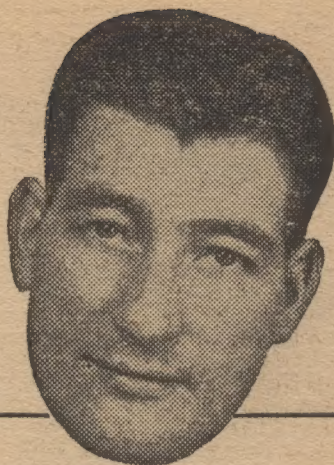
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(Continued from page 8)

ing the streets in celebration, were not underrating the occasion. It was proper that the last spike, the one joining the two lines, should be a golden one, and driven after a prayer in which the nation joined, as the scene was described by telegraph.

But that momentous day in May, 1869, was not the earliest possible one on which the two roads could have met.

Gangs of coolies working from San Francisco eastward through the Sierras, and gangs of European immigrants laying the rails westward from Omaha—they seemed, to the nation's imagination, to be racing toward one another head-on across the face of the West. Actually, both were racing toward Utah. To speed the job, and provide incentive, President Lincoln had defined the flat salt desert there as "mountain country," through which each road was entitled to government credits of \$48,000 for each mile of completed track.

These, obviously, would be the easiest mountains ever graded for rails. Accordingly, when the two crews met in the desert, they simply ignored one another, each continuing in its own direction in parallel lines. The U.S. however, with a twinge of pity for its taxpayers, intervened in the name of history and ordered the roads to make junction at Promontory Point, just outside Ogden, Utah.

Otherwise, the West might have had two golden spikes instead of one. But later. And at a high price, even for gold.

Paul Gray
Salt Lake City, Utah

They might still be going, back and forth, if cooler heads hadn't prevailed. This next one shows you how to make something out of nothing, Western style:

Dear Editor:

Prevention of mayhem in Kansas cowtowns was a good deal complicated by the fact that anything you could dream of—and things you couldn't dream of—might end in sudden death. On at least one occasion, a man was killed in a battle over old birth certificates and jury notices that were of interest to no one at all.

Two towns, Cimarron and Ingalls, were engaged in a bitter rivalry over which should be the official county seat. Between more personal feuds, it seemed as good a quarrel as any in which to risk life and limb—and so Ingalls, the current underdog in the dispute, engaged two deputy sheriffs to highjack the county records from the Cimarron courthouse. Both men were later to become famous as peace officers—one was Jim Marshall, and the other was Bat Masterson.

On the day of the proposed transfer, Masterson, Marshall and a contingent of Ingalls citizens drove into Cimarron in a

dray and parked under the courthouse walls. The two deputies went inside and began helping themselves to the disputed records. Their co-belligerents waited two stories below for the papers to be thrown out of the window.

It is not clear whether most of the passersby in the streets of Cimarron knew what the ruckus was all about. But someone must have appealed to their honor as citizens—for they quickly mobbed around the men from Ingalls, opened fire and drove them off, dray and all. That left Masterson and Marshall stranded on the second floor of the courthouse—a position they were forced to defend with guns.

The tempers of the Kansans, once aroused, were not easily assuaged. For twenty-four hours, the unlucky deputies withstood the siege. In the course of the shooting, one Cimarron citizen was killed, a casualty list which seems quite limited, all things considered. At last, outsiders happened to arrive from Dodge, not itself noted for peace and quiet. However, this was one occasion when men from Dodge City came to silence guns, not to sound them. They talked the wrathful Cimarron people into letting Masterson and Marshall leave the courthouse alive.

The two deputies were subsequently tried for murder, but were acquitted.

As for the papers, some of which had been thrown out of the window, and for which a small war had been declared—no one ever found out what had become of all of them. Sort of lost sight of them in the shuffle.

Gene Halliday
Lawrence, Kansas

In the Old West, too, you could never tell when you were going to be taken literally:

Dear Editor:

To modern ears, the hellfire sermons preached by itinerant ministers of the frontier may seem a little dogmatic and dated. Yet the congregations were likely to be far more literal than the circuit riders who served them.

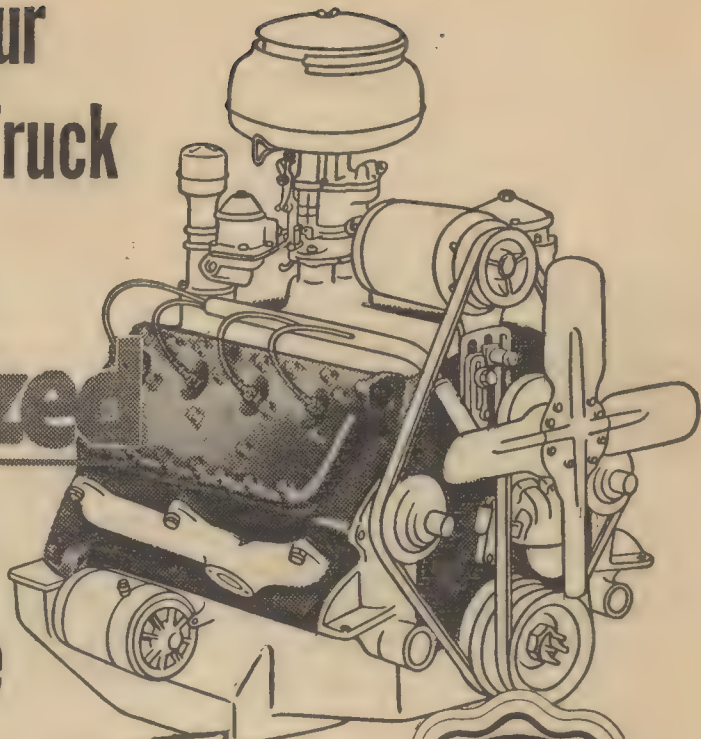
Peter Cartwright, an early evangelist, once preached on the text, "Take up thy cross and follow me." All through the sermon, he noticed the sombre eyes of one particular backwoodsman fixed intently upon his face.

The next time he addressed the same congregation, he was amazed to see the same backwoodsman come into the meeting, carrying his wife on his back. The man explained with complete seriousness that she was his cross, and no greater cross could be imagined.

Cartwright felt later that he had never preached to better effect—once he was presented so squarely with the problem, it was

(Continued on page 12)

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(Continued from page 10)

comparatively easy to talk husband and wife into treating one another with more kindness.

Joseph Ferris
Independence, Missouri

Here's an item about the prized Western delicacy, flapjacks:

Dear Editor:

According to the conventional picture, the annual rendezvous of the Western fur trappers was a fairly drunken spree, at which trappers bartered a year's supply of precious furs for a fortnight full of cheap whisky.

Actually, according to contemporary accounts, the great temptation was not whisky at all, but pancakes. These tidbits were not even sweetened, but merely concocted from flour and river water, and fried in buffalo grease. The fur company, setting its own price on coffee and flour, was quickly able to get back from each trapper his annual income from furs—usually about three hundred dollars. Coffee at the rendezvous was offered at a dollar a pound, flour for twenty-five cents, and sugar—which was usually eschewed as a luxury—was also a dollar a pound.

Jim Carroll
Hot Springs, Arkansas

Our next correspondent tells of the terrible result of a hatred about which we hear little:

Dear Editor:

Bloody and bitter as were the feuds between white man and Apache in the Southwest, they died earlier than another feud which is often lost sight of on this side of the border—the hostility between the Apaches and the Mexicans.

Although he lived with a gun at his side, Sheriff John Slaughter was at heart a peacemaker. As a young married man, in the 90's, he had adopted an orphaned Mexican child, and was bringing her up as his own. Once, while his company was trailing a band of marauding Apache below the Mexican border, he came upon another abandoned child, this one Indian, in a hastily deserted Apache encampment. He took the second little girl home, also. He and his wife tried to bring the two up as sisters.

Perhaps the little Mexican had been too old when he adopted her to forget ancestral hatreds, perhaps it was a violence in the air.

When she was eight, the older girl remembered what the Apache had done to her people, poured gasoline on her Indian foster-sister, and burned her to death.

It was one of the last acts of violence against Indians in the area.

Wesley Ott
Tucson, Arizona

And here's an account of the way Montana miners went at it hammer and tongs:

Dear Editor:

They built the Main Street in Helena, Montana, along the course of an old, dried-up stream. There was some grumbling among local prospectors. It was just such dried-up streams that had yielded fortunes in gold dust to the lucky, and it seemed a shame to waste the spot on a thoroughfare.

So convinced were the residents, however, that there were riches waiting in the squandered ground of Main Street, that the contractor who dug the foundations for the Montana National Bank in 1884 asked no money for the job. Instead, as payment, he merely asked full title to the gravel excavated in the course of the work!

Harold Leslie
Helena, Montana

We're at the end of the trail for this time, gents. We'd like to hear more and more from you about the Old West, so keep sending in these stories that you run across. We'll be only too glad to use them.

—THE EDITORS

The editors and staff of FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES join in mourning the lovers of Western literature at the passing, earlier this year, of Raymond S. Spears, long a valued contributor to these pages and an outstanding authority on the American West. Mr. Spears will long be remembered by the readers of this magazine for the new and moving sidelights his writings cast on the careers and personalities of Jesse James, the Ford brothers, Butch Cassidy and many others—much of his material based on his personal acquaintance with the men and their times and challenging accepted concepts. Mr. Spears' latest work, a comprehensive history of Quantrill—one of the most disputed careers in American history—will be published soon in FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES. His writing career covered more than half a century. Survivors are his widow, Eleanor, and two sons, Charles of Hawthorne, and John, professor of languages at the College of the Pacific.

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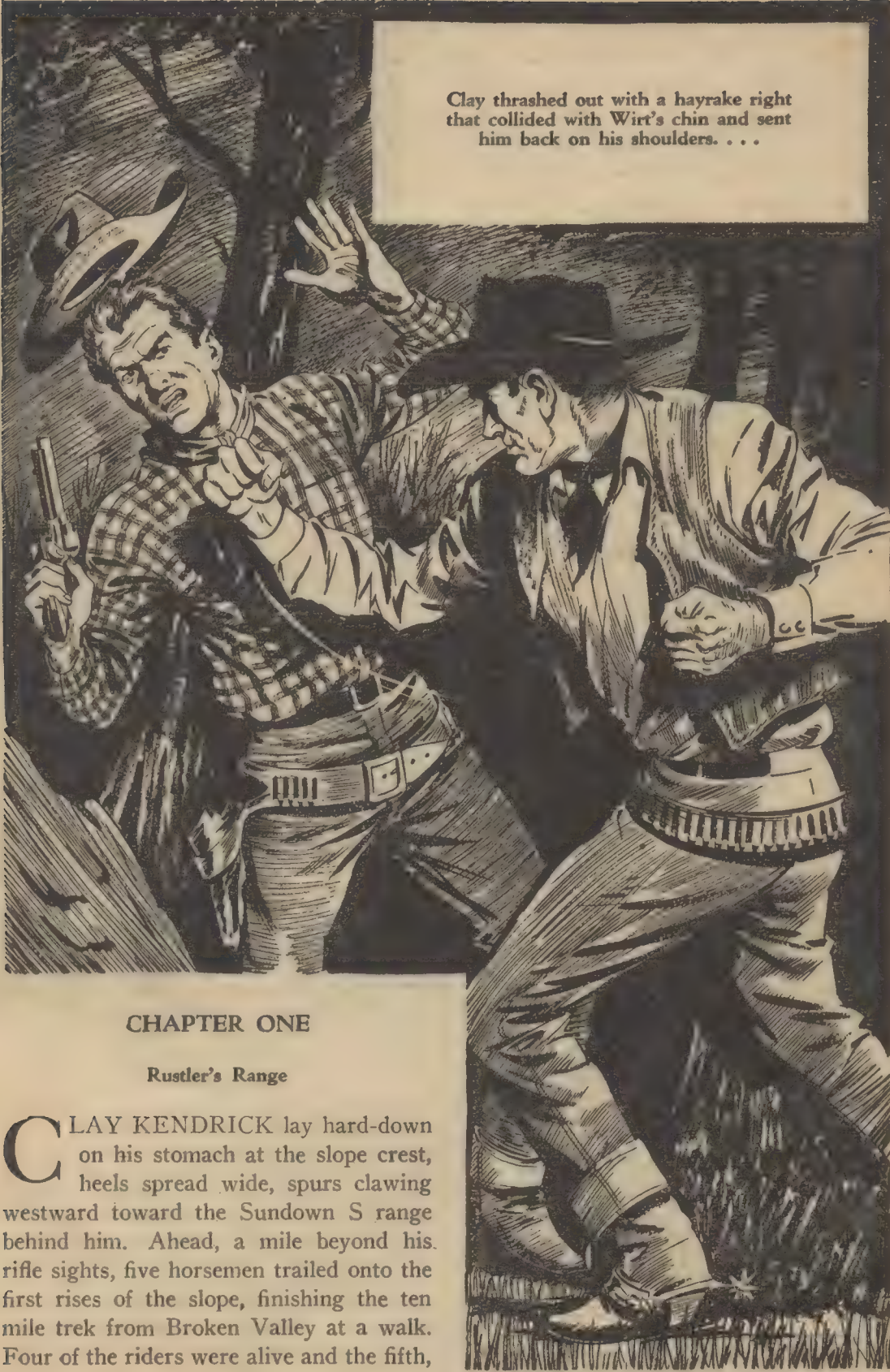
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"This range was hell-born yesterday — tomorrow it may die. I'll take my share today, gents— on the wrong end of a rope . . . or the right end of a gun!"

**A Novel by
GEORGE C. APPELL**





Clay thrashed out with a hayrake right that collided with Wirt's chin and sent him back on his shoulders. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Rustler's Range

CLAY KENDRICK lay hard-down on his stomach at the slope crest, heels spread wide, spurs clawing westward toward the Sundown S range behind him. Ahead, a mile beyond his rifle sights, five horsemen trailed onto the first rises of the slope, finishing the ten mile trek from Broken Valley at a walk. Four of the riders were alive and the fifth,

from his sagging posture cross-saddle, was dead.

One down, thought Clay Kendrick, and he mused upon who it was. He shifted his sights from Laycock, riding in the lead, to Wirt, riding third, just behind the dead man. Clay kept his pull-finger ahead of the trigger guard, not wanting any accidents this early. Accidents, he knew, were hard to see before they happen; and he knew further that any day, any moment, one might happen to him. Fast. Before he saw it. So he kept his sights on Phil Wirt, balancing the front blade on the man's dusty shirt at the point where the silk neckerchief covered the top button. A good place for a bullet, that. It prevents crying out, causing alarm and confusion.

Laycock looked up the slope, and the westering sun made his gray mustache a blob of red. Laycock looked up the slope, and Clay Kendrick dragged the rifle back to his body, gripped it, braced his legs and stood up. He'd only ridden for Sundown S for three weeks; it wouldn't do to have the owner catch him sighting loosely with a loaded piece.

The five horses came on at a plodding walk, knees and hocks bending and breaking evenly, hands rising and falling easily. Phil Wirt pulled out of line and came up to Laycock, his free hand tilting its glove to his hatbrim as he noted Kendrick above them.

Clay saw Wirt's mouth move, saw Laycock nod. Saw Wirt fall back into line. He held the rifle closer. He said, half-aloud, "You son." Then he added, trying not to smile, "Range manager!" It used to be boss, where Clay Kendrick had worked. It was owner and range boss and top hand and riders and peelers and cooks. But in the brief passage of six months, Phil Wirt had slowly changed all that. He was range manager, and there were assistant range managers and bronc men and range men. You could hear them chuckling about Sundown S from Dodge

down to the Dalles, chuckling at old Laycock, who'd let Wirt arrange it that way. And if you'd listened sharp, you'd have heard them plotting for a quick grab at the stock. No one on Sundown S heard it, and the night before, there'd been a rushing rustle from the bench range down through Broken Valley to nowhere. Which left Laycock with half his herd, a sore mouth from cussing, and suspicion of everybody.

It was the suspicion that bothered Clay Kendrick. A man couldn't operate the way he wanted to when folks were always looking over his shoulder, into his saddlebags, into his bunk.

Laycock pulled down on the slope crest and saw Clay Kendrick without looking fully at him. The owner was staring directly at Clay's leathery length and swift-eyed, weather-axed features. As if he'd see something there that would force him to a decision he was not willing to make. Not yet, at least.

"We got one, Kendrick."

Clay faced the body bent over the second horse. A short tarp had been rigged around the head, shrouding the features. "No face?"

One of the two tail riders spurred up. Slaybaugh, an assistant range manager. Short yellow hair and uncertain hands and a jaw that kept swinging left to right, left to right, like he was looking for something with his tongue. "Nice shooting," was all he said. He said it to Laycock's back.

Laycock ignored him. "Anyone pass here?"

"No, sir. Not even a bird. Whoever done it got clean away."

"Through Broken Valley," Laycock supplied. He wiped his mustache. "Trail ended in the rocks east."

Phil Wirt circled around the dead man and intruded himself between Clay and the owner. To Clay he said, "Running fight, Kendrick. You should have been there."

Clay moved his chin up and down. He turned and took up his horse and swung on. He didn't boot the rifle, he kept it on his arm. "Too bad you didn't bag 'em all, Wirt."

Wirt's sudden smile was tight. "You mean that?"

"I seldom say what I don't mean."

Laycock released his mustache, as if he'd just arrived at a conclusion of importance. "We'll go back now."

They faced into the sunset, headed for Sundown S and a quick burial ceremony and a silent supper. Then Clay, riding tail, asked abruptly, "Thought you'd have planted this gent where he lay."

Wirt answered. "We have other plans." His smooth face came sharp about. "We want to see if anyone at Sundown S knows him." And he faced forward again, and Clay knew that he was smiling.

Maybe about Laycock's niece, maybe not. A man never knew what Wirt was amused by, though sometimes it wasn't hard to guess. This time, Clay Kendrick guessed Marylou. She'd be waiting, right enough, but not for Wirt. Not for Kendrick, either. She'd be waiting out her uncle's return, sitting at the wicker table, maybe, posed in arched tension.

It had been that way for months now, ever since the Cedar Rock outfit had been jumped north of Sundown S and Laycock's brother had lost all his stock and his wife and his own life to boot. Marylou had no other place to go, and she came down to her uncle's on a rig with her heart-agony already buried deep in her, too proud to let it out. Too proud and too strong to show it or speak of it; though gradually, these past few weeks, the lines had unset from her face and left it soft, like it was created, and her eyes had begun to live again, and Sundays she tied a ribbon in her hair and played the spinet for whoever wished to sing.

Clay Kendrick, following Slaybaugh into the lavender distances, had to shut his

eyes hard against the memory of the Cedar Rock raid. He needed to lower his face and keep his teeth strong against themselves so the air wouldn't rush from his lungs and the flush wouldn't show on his skin. He wasn't too proud of the part he'd played at Cedar Rock and, being sensitive inside, it would hurt him for a long time.

Ahead now in the veil of twilight, Sundown S began taking shape, like a soft-angled mirage. One moment it wasn't there, and then suddenly it was; and even as they lined toward it, small orange squares appeared in rows, and a hand with a lantern moved from ranch house to bunkhouse, swinging the lamp, so that it reminded Clay of some crazy kid with a jack o'lantern. He wondered if there were any kids, anywhere, or if the whole world was filled with level-eyed men with close-braced guns and poised boots. Men circling Clay Kendrick, peering down at him and into him and through him with yellow-rimmed eyes and satanic smiles. . . .

The shot exploded and the horses lunged and Laycock called out. "Us comin' in! Slide them bars!"

And the hand with the lantern whirled around and crouched and recovered and hopped toward the home gate. A long rectangle of orange materialized at the ranch house, and a slim, full-skirted shape appeared in it.

The pole bars screamed through metal hasps and the cavalcade of six passed through the high stanchions and padded up the paths laid by the lights. Laycock turned his horse over to the hand, exercising the prerogative of an owner, and one by one the men behind him peeled toward the stable. Slaybaugh had the reins of the dead man's horse, and he handled them gently—as if the corpse might come alive and mount up and escape without warning.

Phil Wirt said, "Just a minute" to the hand. "Take mine too." He handed over the reins, removed his gloves, and followed

Laycock to the verandah. Marylou was there, straining her eyes against the night. And she recognized her uncle and went into his arms while Phil Wirt waited, hat in hand, shifting his weight from one leg to the other.

Clay Kendrick put his horse in and tended him and soothed him; the animal had been tied up all day waiting at trail guard, and now he wanted to come apart and have a gallop down the sand. "Steady, now, steady..." And Clay thought, *We both need it, amigo, we both need to hold in a bit, to stay sat awhile...*

He lifted his hull off the blanket and carried it to the rack and dropped it athwart with a thump. He tended the blanket and returned to his horse and put a dry blanket over him against the coming cool of evening. There was no telling when he'd need that horse, and need him in a hurry. Stiff tendons have sent more than one man to his grave.

In the bunkhouse, Slaybaugh was perched on the rim of a bottom cot, facing the hand called Shorty. They were chipping small talk back and forth as men will flip pennies to the wall, but when Clay Kendrick stalked in they stopped.

Clay nodded to Shorty. "Guess you heard."

"Heard what?"

Slaybaugh's eyes caught Clay's, and Kendrick knew then that he was as far from Sundown S as if he'd been out in Broken Valley or beyond.

The suspicion was focused on him; it came from Laycock to all of them, but always it seemed to center, ultimately, on Kendrick. "They got away, 'cept for one."

Slaybaugh scratched his jowls. "That a surprise?"

"It should be." Clay shook off his shirt and took a towel and a basin and slung the towel around his shoulders. He'd been left as guard to make sure the stolen herd wasn't swung back in its tracks. He had not been taken on the

chase, and that meant certain definite things to these two men, Slaybaugh and Shorty.

Shorty said, "Bein' left behind, thataway, I shouldn't think you'd know the difference between a surprise an' a full catch."

Clay's rifle was racked under his cot bar, but he still carried his hand gun. It was a habit he had acquired, recently. Sometimes at night he'd wake up feeling its angular hardness under his hip. The heel of his right palm was one inch from the hand gun as he asked, softly, "Meaning what?"

Shorty's shoulders went up and down once. "Nothin'." His wink was for Slaybaugh. "Someone's got to do it."

Clay waited another instant, but neither man spoke or moved. They sat, eyes on the planking. They sat tautly, hands relaxed yet ready.

Kendrick swung out to the pump and and hefted the handle and brought water from the well. Bending, he glanced all around—carefully—before he ducked his face and hands and chest into the icy bite of the water. He rose dripping and blowing, and twisted in every direction as he dried himself. The hand gun felt good against his hip.

MISS MARYLOU was serving from the platters the cook had laid down.

They all sat dour-mouthed, except for Marylou. Laycock and Wirt, Slaybaugh and Shorty; Kendrick and the hands not tracing fence. It had been this way for so long that it seemed natural to them, like a mode of conduct. Expectancy, fear, mistrust.

When Laycock or Marylou asked for something, everyone leaped to pass it; when anyone else said bread, or salt, or butter please, it was presented quickly, stiffly. Except for Kendrick. Kendrick had to wait, or reach. He was aware of a

-muted thought-cacophony of voices blending into the accusation that was electrifying the whole outfit and making men's hands move unsurely, their voices speak too loudly. Obscurity is a safe thing when dealing with the law, the obscurity of signing on can place a man in a position to keep an eye on the outfit and let the gang know when the time has come for a raid. *For another raid, Kendirck.*

"Clay Kendrick?" She used his full name. She was offering a bowl of jam. "It's a good dessert."

The jam was good. He used it and passed it to his left, to Shorty. The hand shook his head. "I don' go for sweets."

The jam dipped around the table.

Laycock finished coffee and held a toothpick in front of him, not applying it. "Thing is, when'll it come again?" He didn't expect an answer. There wasn't any answer. "'F we can ship what's left to the railhead, we'll be doin' well." He used the pick.

Phil Wirt touched off a cigarette and grinned through the smoke. "They're not likely to jump again. I think it's over, for here. After here, and then Cedar Rock—" He broke off, trying not to look near Marylou. "What I mean is, the whole range'll be safe from here in." He regarded the cigarette with deep interest.

Marylou's voice was silken. "What do you think, Clay?"

Kendrick had to do things with his hands. Had to fish pockets for makings and put them together. Had to light two matches before one caught. "Hard to say." His tone was gruffer than he'd meant it to be. He wasn't accustomed to being onstage, with the lights full on him. It made him all hands and wrists and arms and feet.

Laycock looked the short length of the pick, tilting the tip up so that he could sight it on Clay Kendrick. *Just like you sighted your front-sight blade on me this afternoon,* Laycock's eyes were saying.

Which is just the reason I'm not runnin' you off, 'cause I'd rather watch you. Easier to watch you here than look for you elsewhere.

Clay exhaled without removing the paper from his lips. "Really hard to say."

"Mr. Laycock?" Phil Wirt raised a palm and whispered briefly, and the owner nodded.

Marylou didn't like it. "Let's tell secrets in the parlor, gentlemen, not the dining room." And she was on her feet reaching for dishes, and they all were on their feet shuffling away from the table.

Clay's elbow was drawn firmly back and he was hauled slowly around. It was Laycock, mustache full gray now, and with no toothpick under it. "Like to see you outside a moment. B'hind the stables."

Three trudged that way—Clay Kendrick, Laycock and Phil Wirt. Clay found himself between the other two, and in front of them was the rigored body, not yet rancid in the night chill.

Laycock commanded, "Take off that tarp."

Clay kneeled, reached and tugged. The tarp caught fast and he had to stoop close over it to unhinge the lashings. And then it came free, and Clay stood up breathing hard.

Phil Wirt crossed his arms. "Pal of yours?"

Clay dropped the tarp onto the shattered blue face on the ground. There was little use being secretive about it further, he would have to admit to it now. "That's Bat McCune."

"From Cedar Rock?" Wirt unfolded his arms and let them hang ready.

"How'd you know that, Wirt?"

Wirt's knuckles came forward a bit. "It's odd as a three dollar bill that you know his name."

Clay Kendrick moved away from the stiffening body. "Always a good idea to identify your dead before you put 'em

under, isn't it?" He glared at Phil Wirt.

Laycock sniffed in and out once. He started to glance at Wirt, didn't, put his eyes on Clay instead. "Where'd you know him?" Leading questions are not polite questions, even if a man has only ridden for you less than a month. But the owner would risk anything now. "Rode with him, maybe?" That way, the rudeness was off and the question easier.

"No law against knowing people, is there?" Clay hooked a thumb downward. "You get him, Mr. Laycock?"

"I did." Laycock let the words escape with great satisfaction. He put his palms together and, in a moment, started to rub them as he spoke. "Not bad shooting, till the sheriff comes . . . dammit"—to Wirt, this time—"I wrote that letter to Dodge weeks ago, an' he hasn't showed yet."

A hardness ran across Clay's mouth. "Sheriff from Dodge?"

Wirt shot spit. "Hell, all he did was paste up posters for arrest, and his deputies did most of it, talkin' to tale-bearing people, so I hear."

"Some got away." Laycock was studying Clay Kendrick cleanly. "Wonder they don't paste up posters for this crowd."

Clay's mouth relaxed. "Mebbe no one knows who they are for sure."

"My brother would've know for—" Laycock broke it off and wheeled on one heel and turned the stable corner and was gone.

Wirt's thumb curved shortly. "You have the honor of buryin' this thing. Put it up beyond the hill there, under the rocks, so coyotes won't get it."

"Sure, Wirt." Clay kept his hand an inch from his gun until Phil Wirt disappeared, and then he caressed the butt, just for practice.

He came down from the hill and put the spade back on its nail and heard the sound of the spinet. It was coming from the main house and it flowed sweetly into the plum-blue night and it made Clay

Kendrick feel sad, somehow. Unaccountably sad, like the sadness that comes from some forgotten memory of an event couched in sorrow and forced, long since, to the back of the mind.

He went that way, nearing the house on boot-tips, though he had no reason for stealth; he padded quietly up to the parlor window and leaned to one side of it, hat in hand, face averted. Marylou was following the words of the song with her lips, not singing, and her hands swept gently over the keys as she played. Phil Wirt was at her side, and twice while Clay watched he turned the pages for Marylou. Yellow light from the green-globed lamp shone taffy on her hair and made her throat and cheeks seem the whiter. Her lips parted and closed, parted and closed. . . .

Where've I heard it before? The question danced around Kendrick's memory, teasing him, poking him quickly, then flying away.

Wirt lifted over another page and the song rose in cadence and the answer came to Clay: at Cedar Rock, he'd heard it. Just before the first shots, just before Laycock's brother had come pounding out to the corrals, his wife at his heels, to die there.

Clay left the window, not putting on his hat yet. He stalked away from the sound, away from the misty memory that had sharpened so swiftly, trying to put it back where it belonged. It wouldn't stay put, and he had to think of other things, of more immediate things, to dissolve it. Of the night before, for instance.

He stretched out in his blanket with the gun nudging his hip, and he tried to concentrate on the night before. Someone had slipped, that was as sure as moon-rise. *If Laycock had put me on herd guard out there, no one would've slipped.*

And Kendrick suffered himself to feel a certain sense of shame at his own inadequacy.

CHAPTER TWO

Who Dies Next?

MORNING light was brittle as the nerves of the people at table, and when coffee had been passed for the last time, Clay followed Laycock onto the verandah and waited until the owner had a cheroot going. "Mr. Laycock, I'd like a word."

"What about?" Laycock was brusque—brusquer than he had been yesterday or the day before. The thing was closing in on him, was getting him frayed. It was not knowing what to do that was unravelling him; he'd given pursuit, and they'd gotten away, minus one. Now he had to maintain herd watch at home, lest they strike a second time for the half they'd missed. He was in the middle, and he didn't know how far the ends were. "About last night?" He wanted to keep this man with the outfit; he'd almost apologize for the

harsh implied accusation, if he had to.

"Nossir." Clay licked brown paper and twisted the ends shut and lighted up. He paused an instant, letting the hands file past to break out their ponies. "About to-day." Smoke rushed from his narrow nostrils and dipped away to nothingness. "I can mebber track further than you an' Wirt."

Laycock was doubtful. "Think you know this country better'n I do?"

"It isn't the country, it's the habits of the men who are loose on it."

"Ah." Laycock rolled the cheroot to his side teeth and bit down on it. "What men, Kendrick?" He pretended sudden interest in the pole bars of the home gate.

"The ones that rustled your herd."

The cheroot straightened upward. "I see." Phil Wirt ambled out, and the owner told him to see to the relief of the range guard.

"I'll pass it to Slaybaugh. I've got

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work here," Wirt said, glancing at Clay.

Laycock nodded at his retreating back.

"I see," he repeated. "You admit to knowledge of their tactics, that it?"

"I'm prepared to."

"How did you come by that knowledge?"

"I can't say just yet."

"Well, go ahead," Laycock said, "but you'll be alone."

"I understand that. I didn't say anything about the herd. I only said I could mebbe track further than you."

"Find the gang, huh?"

Clay inhaled and exhaled before he blurted, "Yes."

"Go ahead." Laycock never took his eyes from Clay Kendrick until he was through the gate and tracking southeast in the direction of Broken Valley. Not until then did he call Phil Wirt. "Stay with that."

"I'd like to." Wirt tightened his neckerchief, and he was smiling.

Laycock coughed. "Don't forget a gun."

"I won't."

Clay rode, reins loose, stirrups long so his legs wouldn't cramp. He rode with his felt brim almost to his nose to fend off the glare of the up-wheeling sun, and only when he looked backward across the empty brownness behind him did he raise the brim at all. The third time he looked back, he caught the figure of a horseman two miles down, black under the bronze furnace from the high eastern skies.

So Clay Kendrick picked it up a little, using his rowels occasionally, talking to his horse. Between Sundown S's bench range and Broken Valley he cut the trail of the rustled herd, and bent right, south, with the sun directly over him. Two slopes beyond the one he had waited on the day before, he pulled in and waited until the figure of Phil Wirt reappeared. Then he put his horse forward again, and now he was smiling. He pondered whether or not Wirt would be smiling too, and

decided not. He further decided that this was fun.

He stayed in the speed-splayed tracks of the herd all the way to Broken Valley, and he kept a pace that would require him to spend most of the afternoon crossing it.

There were three reasons for this, none of which occurred to him separately and clearly, but all of which impelled him to act as he did. First, he was in no hurry; his cantle roll would sleep and ration him for as long as he cared to use it, within reason. Second, he wanted to see as much of Broken Valley as possible, because he liked it. And third, he wanted to keep Wirt a comfortable distance behind him, and Wirt could not enter the Valley until Kendrick was almost out of it.

He jogged on across the dried grass of the floor, grass that was burnt yellow in yellow spreading patches, then thick green toward the twin streams, marking their drift. He watered at each of them, once filling his canteen upstream of his lapping horse; once he dismounted under some cottonwoods and cinched up and lit a smoke and smoked it awhile, face to northwest. He didn't see Phil Wirt, but he thought he saw a twink of sun on metal, motionless at the yonder entrance.

Then he was riding down the herd again, the afternoon sun hot on his right shoulder, and when he tapped his hand gun just to make sure, the metal was warm on his palm.

The sloping rocks of the south wall were a crimson wash when he reached them, reflecting the silent agony of the dying sun. The trail faded here and widened, and a quarter mile out of the Valley it vanished altogether. This was where Laycock and the others had turned back, and this must be where Bat McCune had died. Kendrick studied the shelving rock for signs of dried blood or cartridge cases, but there were none. He saw only chipped shale where heavy hoofs had

struck and plunged and plowed. He was riding by guess now, seeking the upper rimrock, taking the way a rustler would take if he had a herd and was in a hurry. He stopped, just below rimrock, and looked carefully behind him at the pink and green Valley floor. He compelled himself to wait there until he saw Phil Wirt picking his way south, favoring the open places, staying clear of the cottonwoods and ambush.

Wirt, now, could cause trouble for Clay Kendrick; and Kendrick was a man whose calling in life made trouble a wearisome thing. He'd had enough, enough to last for two or three lives, and he wanted no more now. He observed Wirt a moment longer, then swung about and spurred toward the rimrock.

Toward twilight, he dismounted and led his horse to save the animal's hocks and help it up through the shale. His spur chains clinked and the rowels tinkled, and then the bit chain echoed those two, after which his spur chains spoke again. On level ground, it sounded almost rhythmical. *Like a spinet*, he thought. Like a spinet at eventide, with gentle fingers crossing the keys.

"Stop there!"

He'd known he would find them around here someplace. He had been waiting for their challenge. When you're looking for a man who also may be looking for you, it is sometimes best to let him show you where he is, instead of wasting your time trying to find his exact location.

Clay kept his right hand on the reins behind him, and his left hand low near his knee.

"I wouldn't move a hair, Hatrick," another voice said. "Till we know you come alone."

"I'm alone." Clay raised his face. "What makes you so nervous?"

The first voice husked, "Come on up. We ain't nervous."

He hauled his horse the last twenty

yards, and stepped suddenly into a box-shaped break in the rocks. It was, he noted, an excellent lookout for the whole Valley. "Figured someone'd be campin' here. Nice place to camp, this." He shifted his eyes from Rossiter to Klepp to Masters. "Nice an' cozy." He dragged reins over his horse's head and dropped them.

"So talk," Rossiter urged.

"So tell me why you're here, 'stead of down by the Line."

"We got a right to be wherever we please, Hatrick. An' you're not runnin' this club."

Clay squatted and hung his arms off his knees. "I realize that, of course." Quickly he added, "They got Bat."

Surprise showed on the three twilighted faces. "He allus did ride too high," Rossiter observed casually. "Only one from Cedar Rock the sheriff ever recognized."

Clay's nod was firm. "Which makes it safer for a lot of people."

"What're you doin' down around here?" Klepp asked. "Thought you'd stay where you're needed."

"It's a free country."

"An' we're all free citizens." Klepp rose to examine the purpling Valley floor.

Clay cleared his throat harshly to relieve a noose-tight restriction. These men would string him up as soon as they'd nod to him. "I might pack on down to the Line."

"If you think it'll do any good," Rossiter told him. "How's Laycock?" He asked that in the tone he would employ for a new hireling.

Clay grinned in the dusk. "Funny thing—he's waiting for the sheriff to come down from Dodge an' help him." They all laughed, and Clay's laugh was the most ragged of the lot.

"Sheriff from Dodge," Masters spat in eloquent opinion. "Klepp—see anythin'?"

Klepp lowered himself into the break.

"Too dark. But I doubt anyone'll mix in to our campin' trip." He coughed sandily. "We'll see yuh again, maybe, Hatrick. We're breakin' camp now."

Clay rose. "Well, be good, gents."

"Keep an eye on the Line, Hatrick."

Clay took his reins and for fifteen awful minutes threaded down through the shale ahead of his horse, not knowing whether this reprieve would continue or whether a flame-stab and a flat bark would mark a verdict pronounced behind his back.

HE BREATHED more easily, down on the valley floor. The moon had still to flood the night when he swung a leg up and found stirrups and trotted west along the Valley's southern wall. He still didn't know where the herd was, and nobody seemed inclined to tell him. Maybe they'd tell him later, maybe they wouldn't. It could be at Mustang Mesa or it could be further down, near The Piñons. The deal as he had it reckoned was that the herd would be near The Piñons.

And so far, everyone was safe. An owner can't accuse, and a sheriff can't arrest, men they can't identify and who have no evidence of crime with them.

So Clay was smiling wanly, the noose-tightness relaxed and his throat free, his elbows limp and his legs long. He rode that way for a mile, heading on a dark stand of cottonwoods, and he was within half a mile of it when the miracle of the moon occurred and the trees became bearded with silver.

That's when he heard the silken-soft word, "Kendrick?"

Hand to gun, eyes on the trees, he sat straight up and down, reins back against his belly.

Silhouetted against the crystal disc of the moon, he was helpless.

The silver leaves jiggled, moved, parted. A figure on foot left them and

walked to within ten feet of Clay's left stirrup. "Throw off, Kendrick. We can talk out here."

Clay hesitated, giving Phil Wirt opportunity to say more; giving himself the opportunity of noting Wirt's gun hugged close to his hip, bore steady.

Carefully, Clay swung off. Cautiously, he stepped forward. A forearm's length from Phil Wirt, he whispered, "Start talkin'."

Wirt jerked his gun at the moonpath. "How come you're comin' back so soon? Find what you wanted?"

"I might have."

There was a curious pause. Then Phil Wirt stepped back a pace. "You may be looking at the next owner of the Sundown S, Kendrick. As such, I'd like to clean certain matters up now."

"Such as?" Clay's mouth was drying out and his heart was slugging his ribs and his palms were bone cold.

"Where I've seen you before."

"So?" And Clay's heart became a slamming pump.

"Yes." Wirt lifted his chin to clear moon-shadow from his eyes. "A picture, it seems. Like on a poster." Wirt's gun muzzle was returning from the moonpath when Clay hit him.

He threshed out with a hayrake right that collided with Wirt's up-angled chin and snapped his skull back and sent him thumping onto his shoulders. Wirt bounced once, heavily, and Clay had his gun. He stuck it into his shirt.

Wirt placed his palms wide on each side of himself and slowly sat up.

"Come on," Clay invited.

Snake-swift, Wirt lunged to his knees and rolled off them and sprang at Clay with knuckles spinning high. He slashed a left across Clay's cheek and Clay doubled in with a belly-shaking left and a spine-jouncing right that spun Wirt off his soles and twisted him skidding into the sand.

He lay there on his face, gasping and quivering, fingers scratching the dirt for traction.

"Wirt, there's such a thing as bein' too damned efficient." Clay let Wirt roll over, let him brace an elbow, half rising. "And don't mention posters to me."

Phil Wirt controlled his breathings and swallowed hard and shook his jaw. He came further off the sand. "What do you get out of this?" His whisper was sharp.

Clay yanked the other's gun from his shirt, arced his arm over his shoulder and pitched the weapon into the trees. A horse whickered in stuttering soprano. "Whatever I choose to take. Don't mount until I'm clear of the Valley." Clay spoke next from the saddle. "Next time, Wirt, you'll stay stretched out." He inclined his chin. "Good night."

Broken Valley was quiet under the limitless white wash of the moon—quiet except for a bird's pert chitter and the muted chuckle of a stream and, in its northern arc, the hoof thumps of Clay's horse. The man rode, relaxed yet alert, muscles limp but hand near holster. He rode with jaws high and eyes wide, sensing with pleasure the tingling of his knuckles. It had felt good to hit a man again and feel cartilage give and air rush out. This was still fun, despite what crouched behind him. Or perhaps it wasn't crouching, perhaps it was cat-tracking him already. He forced himself not to turn. If he turned his head, he'd turn it again. And again. And then he'd get nervous. Nervous men are no good to anyone, principally themselves. Clay didn't turn.

Behind him were Masters and Klepp and Rossiter, watching and listening. They were breaking camp, but for where? They'd never tell him. They considered him a hireling. But they'd meet again, right enough. Somehow, somewhere, they'd cross trails again. It had to be that way. Clay was planning on it. Behind

him was Phil Wirt, fumbling through the trees for his gun, anger crowding into his brain, making it burn.

Clay shook it all off. He directed his conscious thinking to the Valley, and he decided it would make a fine location for a home ranch.

It would be a snug place for a man, if he could settle into it with a clean conscience and a free heart. If it wasn't a renegades' range, a noisome spot, a pocket where thieves threw in their drives and divvied up and moved away in a wake of sorrow. No man wanted to raise build-ings here. The law was too thin. Much too thin. And Clay knew about law.

Laycock and Marylou were waiting, though it was near midnight. Clay turned his horse out and walked up to the house, wondering who they were waiting for. Maybe he'd disappoint them, knocking and stepping into the lamplight. Maybe it should have been Phil Wirt.

Her face told him nothing. He removed his hat and stood tall in the room, waiting for the owner to speak.

All he said was, "Disappointed?" He strolled to a window and peered out, but Marylou didn't follow. Her eyes were full on Clay, and it seemed to him that they held approval of a sort. Laycock faced around from the window. "Or not?"

Clay had to relieve the owner. "Wirt'll be along soon. He dropped his gun."

"Oh?" Laycock's lids fuzzed together. "How?"

"He'll explain that to you, I imagine." Clay passed his hatbrim through his palms, around and around. "For the rest of it, I cut a camp south of the Valley. Three gents lookin' harmless enough."

"Know 'em?"

Clay was caught in his own actions now. He couldn't tell Laycock all he knew. He would have preferred not to mention those three men to Laycock, but there was always the chance that Wirt might have had a look that way too.

"Barely. Thought I'd seen 'em somewhere, but couldn't be sure."

Through closed teeth Laycock hoarsed, "On a poster?"

Clay came right back, not taking a breath. "The men posted for the Cedar Rock job have been taken, I believe."

"All of 'em?" Laycock walked away from the window. "There were others, though." He lifted and lowered his shoulders. "All right, Kendrick. Get some sleep. I'm going to, for certain." His yawn was cavernous. "These men—they were ridin'?"

"About to, I believe. Stopped for rations, looked like."

Laycock seemed to lose interest. "I'll want everyone out to the bench in the mornin'. I'd like to ship at least one steer by rail this season. Good night."

Clay was feeling uncomfortable again, like he had at supper the evening before. He felt onstage and naked, with no lines to speak.

Marylou helped him. She was regarding him as if she'd seen him before somewhere, but couldn't place him. "You're a very strange man, Clay."

He didn't say anything. He couldn't.

• She was closer to him in a couple of steps, her hands behind her, her smile impish. "I'll bet you're a bad man, who eats babies." •

"Well . . . no cause for that, when there's more meat on a cow."

She liked that. "Then you're not a bad man?" Her brows straightened together in mock disappointment.

"That, miss, depends upon where you're sitting at the time." He swung his hat up. "Lots of people, from their side of the fence, would call me bad." He touched his brim, nodded, and managed "Good evenin', Marylou," and sought the cool air and the vast silence of the desert night.

When the echo of the closing door had shuddered from hearing, he twisted a smoke together and walked slowly to-

ward the bunkhouse, pausing only to snap a match alight with his thumbnail. He threw the match away, and through the smoke of his first puff he saw Phil Wirt riding in.

"Kendrick?" Wirt's tone was soft again. He had his gun, but it wasn't out. He dismounted heavily, as if he still hurt someplace. "Thought you ought to know this."

Clay let his cigarette fall, he wanted both hands free. "Know what?"

"Well you see, Kendrick, honesty is part of efficiency, and I'm being honest with you: I'm turning you in to the sheriff when he gets here, on charges of suspicion and consorting. Your three friends back there—very doubtful characters, Kendrick. They'll be embarrassing to explain away."

"They will?" Clay's suspicion had been correct, then. Wirt must have located the camp, or its remains. But if the camp had been abandoned, how could Wirt know there'd been three men exactly? "How come you know that?" Clay asked.

"I'm guessing." Wirt's snicker was nasal. "I like guessing games; they improve the mind."

"Make it more efficient, huh?"

"Precisely. But it's not a guess that I'm turning you in."

Clay's smile was not nice. "Somehow, Wirt, I don't think you will."

CHAPTER THREE

Helldrive

MORNING was a slate bowl covering the world. Morning was damp, with the threat of weather in the biting breeze that disturbed the sands. This morning, thought Clay, was all the accusations of all time directed against the sins of men. He shivered in his shirt as he left the bunkhouse, and he remained cold until long after searing

coffee had burned his belly and left it warm. Laycock detailed them off for the bench range; they all would go, and the hands out there now would return and keep a watch on the home ranch. Laycock was taking no chances.

They rode away through the gate and east for the bench, Laycock leading. On his flank trotted Phil Wirt, neck low in neckerchief to conceal the skin-rip of Clay's knuckles. Then came Slaybaugh and the hand Shorty and two others, and Clay closed the tiny column alone.

There was a threatening whisper in that breeze, Clay mused as he rode. It had a knife edge to it that presaged a shriek of pain, a howl of shock, a rageful voice-lash born of horror.

He wrapped up those thoughts and tied them tightly and placed them on a shelf in his mind—out of immediate awareness, yet handy to the mental grasp. He cased the column in terms of armament and ability: Laycock with a hogleg in his holster and a carbine in the ring socket hung from his pommel; Wirt with a gun on his hip and nothing else—cocky, efficient, sure; Slaybaugh with two .44's suspended from his short ribs, holsters high and easy to reach; Shorty with one .44, low down on his thigh. The two others with one gun apiece, conventional.

Laycock slow and old and unsure. Eager but clumsy, and clumsiness negates the best of intentions. Wirt was fast but weak, depending on others too much. *Delegation of authority!* Slaybaugh was order-taker, the man who couldn't make up his mind. The man who had trouble finding his tongue, the man who looked for something to do but couldn't find it until he was told where it was, and how to do it.

Clay felt fine, that morning as he rode. Dawn had been a gray-lipped old woman wrapped in a ragged shawl, and she had alerted Clay and had passed him by without knowing of her favor. And here was

morning, her icy brat, sending weather signals that meant certain things to certain men, each according to his aims and the side of the fence upon which he sat.

Laycock led them through South Pass's stumpy heights and up the widening reach to the bench country. He led them diagonally onto the range and took them around the long way, where the ascent was not so steep. And then they were raising arms to the night guards and the night guards were packing gear and taking horses and Laycock was posting his pitiful defenses around the sweep and spread of the herd. Up where the timber thinned, he put two hands with orders to keep moving back and forth, overlapping each other on the turn. He sent Slaybaugh to the Pass.

"Kendrick,?" The owner shuffled his horse around on the forehand, bringing himself ahead of Phil Wirt and closer to Clay. "You admitted to a certain knowledge of tactics, once."

"Yes, I did." Clay kept his voice low, wanting Wirt to hear as little as possible.

Laycock wiped his mustache once, and an eagerness flew across his tired eyes. "Well, let's anticipate." He couldn't see Wirt's querulous face. He was talking directly to Clay. "S'pose you were aimin' to run off this stock, Kendrick. How'd you do it?"

Clay had the answer, but he didn't utter it. Not the correct answer, for that would be tipping his hand too soon. So he framed the wrong answer in his mind, and gave it. "I'd stampede 'em—" he had to raise his voice against the whine of the wind—"up through the timber."

The questioning worry on Wirt's face sank to contentment. "Seems that Kendrick here, knows something about the business."

"Seems that way, don't it?" Clay spoke almost pleasantly. He snapped a wink at Laycock. The old man didn't have long to wait now.

The owner remained frosty, but relief showed flatly on him as he sent Shorty to the herd and Wirt to the north boundary and Clay to the northwest. "I want every hand to be within sight of the one next to him as much's possible. That perfectly clear?"

It was clear to them; it was as clear to Clay as the fact that he'd have to stay with Wirt as long as they were on the bench range together, for Wirt could spoil the whole thing if the three men from Broken Valley showed without warning.

Clay swung up and down the herd's flank, talking to the steers, using his voice to keep them calmed. Talking hymn words, repeating sing-song lyrics; reading from memory the printed labels of cans, bags, crates. Riding up and down, keeping Phil Wirt in the tail of his eye.

Mustang Mesa or the Piñons? The question forked into his mind, irritating it, pricking it. He had to know that, he must find it out. The deal as he had been told was that the drive would be rustled to The Piñons, though he couldn't be sure. Neither Rossiter nor Masters nor Klepp would keep a promise just because Clay wanted it kept.

Up and down the windy morning he rode, voice murmuring, eyes awake. Laycock kept the cook at it, and the gauzy smoke from the fire hazed away across the noon light and made men hungry. The owner called them in one at a time, told them to gobble, then sent them out again. Clay had never eaten this high off the hog before. One thing about Laycock, he fed well, even if he did put his trust in smart-alec efficiency experts from east of the Missouri.

The rain came in the afternoon. It came swiftly, as it will in the higher country, but it didn't take on force until toward evening. It made puddles in depressions and it plucked at the puddles with a ruffling sound that made the hands lift their voices to the swaying herd.

Laycock's head was up, his face receiving the rain, not minding it. He was watching for lightning, listening for thunder. He circled the whole herd several times, taut as a dead man strapped to his stirrups, and Clay timed each circle at thirty minutes. Then Laycock put his horse up to the timber where the two overlapping hands were, and his head was still on a swivel.

Clay let his horse find its way toward the north end of the herd, gauging his arrival to the end of Wirt's west swing. It was coming on evening and the rain made things glisten and smell cool; the rain made moist globes out of the steers' eyes and it polished their horns and greased their hides.

Wirt, leaning off his saddle, asked, "Think we should ride together a bit?"

"That's fine."

"Mr. Laycock wants us to stay in sight of each other."

"Sure."

Phil Wirt drew up the knot of his neckerchief and worked his shoulders a few times to unplaster his shirt from his skin. "I don't think we'll have any trouble from outside—do you?"

"Depends."

"On what?" Wirt leaned closer. "On a signal from inside, maybe?"

A man has to be slow and careful when handling the law; one false gesture, one wrong word, and he and his plans will collapse completely. Clay hedged with, "What signal?"

"Maybe we'll find out."

"Maybe."

They sat there without speaking, looking everywhere but at each other. At the dark rain smoking away down the benches, at the gray layers of clouds thickening under twilight skies. At the sodden, stake-legged steers, dumb and tense in a trance of fear of the weather.

Clay reined around to the right and spoke over his shoulder. "My call for supper, Wirt. Don't lose any stock."

The cook had the fly up to keep his fires burning, and Clay stood under it and ate without tasting it, keeping the pewter fork moving, not wasting time.

Then he posted himself back to the northwest watch and made out Wirt's hunched figure heading toward the fly, and half an hour later the fires were covered and it was full dark and there were only the sounds of the rain and the creaking of animal muscles and the intermittent whimper of soaked leather.

Clay flanked the uneasy herd east, hoping for a sign of Phil Wirt, but Phil Wirt wasn't there. Clay used his name, interspersing it with his soothing talk to the steers, but no answer came back.

SOMETHING like panic crept into him and tightened his lungs and made his mouth taste bad. Phil Wirt had left the bench for somewhere. Clay posed to himself the correct answer to Laycock's tactical question, and he assured himself that Phil Wirt was there near South Pass, perhaps already through it. Clay held to a strong walk, wanting to gallop for the timber but not wanting to rouse the steers. At a walk he found the brush, the shale, the scrub. Then he was in the timber and one of the hands questioned him.

Clay had to lie. "Mr. Laycock says take the north watch a few minutes. I got to leave awhile." He left at the same walk,

keeping clear of the stock, keeping wide of the cook fly. He passed onto the sloping ground where the range ended, and ahead was the Pass, sluiced now by water and cold and black against the night. Clay threw off and pegged his horse and went down the rest of the way on slow feet, testing each step to prevent a stone from skipping or a twig from cracking. He doubled low, fingers almost feathering the mud, hatbrim flat back for full vision.

It was Masters' voice that he heard first, rough with anger. It came from down left in the darkness. "First rain, we tol' you."

Wirt hissed him to quietness. "But there's too many!"

"Not in this weather, Wirt. Or mebbe you wanta pick up Sundown S for yourself someday—that it?"

Clay let himself down the mud until he could see each of the four figures.

"... At The Piñons," Rossiter was explaining. "We'll chase this drive right through an' leave it with the Mex boys 'til things cool off."

Wirt growled something Clay couldn't hear. "What about the new hand? Is he in this too? I wouldn't like to think that you boys'd put a man to watch me—"

The breath sank from Clay's lungs when he heard the snap behind him. He felt his spur catch, drag, hold. The stick snapped again as he jerked his boot to free it. The four men below him flopped flat.

Wolf Shows
He is
Smart as a Fox




SEATTLE, Wash.—Robert Wolf, service station owner here, has switched to Calvert Reserve. "It's the smart switch for any man," he says. "Calvert's lighter, smoother, a better buy."

CALVERT RESERVE BLENDED WHISKEY
86.8 PROOF—65% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS
CALVERT DISTILLERS CORP., N. Y. C.

There was just the whisper of rain and the trickle of water and the erratic brushing of the wind.

Clay moved all at once, not in separate motions but as an uncoiling spring moves. He snagged out his gun and wheeled around and pulled his feet from the mud and propelled himself up the trail into South Pass in less than a second. He heard a shot and felt the bullet gasp past him and heard Klepp's curse. He scurried faster, arms swinging, thighs pumping. And he heard boots crunch urgently behind him, coming to get him. He heard Klepp curse Wirt again for firing. Klepp would use a knife, once within throwing distance.

Clay pulled his peg and clapped a leg up and rammed rowels and helped his horse fight up through the viscous suck of the trail to the bench. Something whirred close above him and slashed into the stones ahead. He was savage with his spurs.

Slaybaugh's voice materialized from nowhere. "Wirt? Shall I start 'em through?"

Clay had his rifle out and he used it like a mallet, laying the stock squarely into Slaybough's face. He plunged on up the trail, keeping the rifle high.

Laycock pounded hard down the west rim of the bench and skidded sideways as he armed reins around fast. "Where you been, Kendrick?" he yelled.

Clay tried to speak, but his breath clutched at his throat. He flung an arm out. "The herd—start turnin' it now!"

But Shorty had his orders and he started to carry them out. He squeezed off five shots into the north flank and sent the steers into a mill. He used his quirt, lashing the rumps into collision with shoulders and horns to shove the herd into the Pass and get them running. He fired his sixth shot.

Clay knocked down Leacock's gun and grabbed the owner's reins and jerked him off the trail and pulled him away from

the Pass as the lead steers kettledrummed toward the muddy slot. The kettledrumming became a basedrumming, a thundering, an ear-slicing roar.

The wide horns raked past downward into the slot and a shriek ripped the night and a gun smacked sharply and a man screamed in terror and the herd filled the Pass and chopped it to pieces and macerated everything in it with fear-thrown hooves. Shorty's quirt rose and swung and fell, slashed and cracked and rose and fell. He called for Slaybaugh.

The sky-shaking rumble of heavy hooves drowned out his voice.

Clay lifted a rag-limp rope and shook it out with a short arm motion and put his body into the toss. The loop settled nicely over the calling Shorty and locked his arms to his ribs and snapped him off leather and dumped him, spinning, into the mud at the rear of the vanishing herd. When he tried to reach for his empty gun, Clay put a bullet at his feet, and Shorty sat still.

Clay released Laycock's reins and sat forward in the saddle, smiling slightly at the deafening hoof-artillery pouring out through the Pass. He cupped a hand. "By tomorrow night, we'll have 'em all back again! They'll calm out within ten miles!"

Laycock groped for his voice and fumbled with it and got hold of it. He was holding his gun cross-high, full on Clay, but his grip wasn't strong.

The cook fly bloomed brightly of a sudden and the cook fanned his fires up in reflex action to an emergency that he thought might come his way. The cook had frightened crazed beasts off before with fire.

Clay tugged on the rope. "Get up, you. Mister Laycock, I guess we got us enough evidence, plus a star witness. Stand steady, there!"

Laycock holstered his gun and put a hand to his mustache. He allowed the tail of the stampede to tumble through the

Pass before he spoke. "Now I know where I've seen you before," he said to Clay.

Clay's features were orange and black in the flaring light from the stoves. He fished in a pocket and found metal.

Laycock lowered his hand to his pommel. "Dodge City Times, wasn't it?"

"After Cedar Rock?" Clay had the metal in his palm. "Yeah—but my deputies did most of the tracking down. I—we—got there just too late. To your brother's, I mean." He hooked the badge on his left pocket, where it belonged.

"Hatrick, of course." Laycock said it with a degree of wonderment. "C. L. A. Hatrick, sheriff at Dodge. I should've known that."

"I'm glad Wirt didn't." Clay waved the two hands from the timber down into the night as they flew past the stampede. "They got him from Omaha for this job, an' you know, I figured he'd help 'em empty your range, then try to buy Sundown S cheap an' rustle the stock back onto it. Smart feller, that Wirt."

"I hired him."

Clay spat across the slanting rain. "Weak, though."

"I need a drink, Hatrick. There's a quart in my roll." The owner led off. "I s'pose you'll be ridin' back to Dodge now?"

Clay caught up, jerking Shorty after him. "I dunno." The vision of Broken

Valley rose, mirage-like, in his mind, and it soothed him. A man can't be a sheriff all his life—not when there's a valley like that waiting to be occupied. A valley that echoes mighty well to the sound of a spinet, say.

The whiskey burned comfortably and the fires were warm and the cook had coffee simmering. Over his cup, Clay said, "Shorty, comes morning, you can collect the pieces in the Pass an' put 'em under rocks, so the coyotes won't get 'em. Then we'll hogtie you while the rest of us ride for The Piñons an' catch that other drive. A coupla Mex boys are watchin' it, Mister Laycock, an' I don't think they'll provide too much trouble." C. L. A. Hatrick was totally sick of trouble, at that moment. He'd had enough for several lifetimes, and a man only lives once. That reminded him of an apology he must make, being a sensitive person. "Sorry I had to fool you, Mr. Laycock. But if Wirt had known who I was, he'd have skedaddled and the deal never would have been tried. The others, 'cept for McCune, were only suspect."

Laycock tasted his cup. "You sure fooled me, Hatrick."

"You didn't fire me."

The owner's headshake was rueful. "I don't think Marylou would've approved of that, somehow.... 'Nother drink? To the future?"

They clicked cups on that.

THE modern term "hitchhiker" has an oldtime Western origin—it had to do with two men traveling a long distance on one horse—and all three of them getting plenty of rest. The method was ingenious. The first man would start out on horseback, ride a given distance, hitch the horse to a tree and proceed on foot. The second man would walk until he came to the horse, mount and ride his stint, then leave the animal hitched for his companion.

—Vic Barnes.

THE BIG FREEZE

By WILLIAM R. COX

*"I know when I'm licked, gents,"
Cam Mitchell told them, "but I
ain't dead—not near as dead as
you're gonna be!"*



Ragsdale shoved back his
chair and rose, pointing at
Cam. . . .

CAM MITCHELL rode the shaggy pony down through the pass and saw the telltale tracks leading south. It was Indian work, he knew with despair gripping him. The devils could work in a storm when there was stealing to be done.

The snow lay all around, blanketing the

earth, blanketing all sound, so that he could hear his own heart beating. The pony snuffled and pawed gingerly at the crust of white stuff. It was away below zero now. The temperature had fallen twenty degrees after the storm had stopped. The Indians had taken the last of his small herd through the pass before

the freeze and there was little chance of catching them, Mitch knew.

He hesitated, his jaw tight. He was a lean man, lean-jawed, with deep-set eyes and high cheekbones. He did not show the weariness within him. He had slaved building the cabin, he had worked short-handed with the cattle, he had gambled everything on a good year and freedom from hard luck. He had lost.

Had it been his first loss or his second he could have faced it better, he knew. There was a weakening inside him lately. He was thirty and he had been working, trying all his life to reach the goal of independence, to be his own man.

He was far from religious, yet he instinctively glanced aloft, at the gray sky which merged on the horizon with the snow. He muttered, not for the first time nor the hundredth, "Y'see? Mebbe I shoulda stayed with Custer."

It was then his indecision ceased; he turned the pony about and set him on the trail for Greentown. When he came to the trail which he had so recently broken from his cabin atop the mesa he did not pause, did not even glance aside. The wind whistled and he lowered his head, riding into it, going down to the valley. The pony nickered and increased its pace, eager for oats and a warm stable, scarcely remembering the last time Mitch had gone to town but aware, animal-like, that shelter lay ahead.

Mitch patted a mittened hand against his belt. His slim hoard of savings was safe, all he possessed in the world now except the tableland and cabin which meant nothing to him without cattle. Inside a recklessness built, as though liquor boiled there.

Custer—he had been with the yellow-haired glory seeker. He and Wirey Willow, scouting for the Seventh . . . and finding the Sioux ambush and splitting. Wirey had started for Custer, to warn him, but what became of Wirey was a

thing Mitch never knew and never would.

Mitch could have ridden for Custer, but had chosen Terry, as he knew better than Wirey the road to where Terry waited. But Wirey went and presumably was caught in the trap of the wily Sioux and scalped with the others. Well, Wirey never had amounted to much. He had done time for rustling, a cutting scrape—Wirey was always a rascal, a small, ingratiating, happy-go-lucky philosopher of sorts who went the easy way. Mitch had been very young in 1876, and the ways of Wirey Willow had shocked him. Now he did not know . . . nothing of his own toil and integrity had paid off. He was broke again, almost, and his herd was gone south with Indians he had no stomach to pursue. He rode the weary way into Greentown—a Greentown white with drifted snow, isolated from the world while the freeze endured, yet containing The Cisco Bar and what Mitch needed for this time in his unhappy career, he thought grimly—a drink, a poker game, one last go-around before he took off, never to return. Never, he told himself, to try again. He had failed on the Platte through drought, he had failed in Mexico through politics—the list of his failures was too long. He was through—all the way through.

The Cisco Bar was a low-ceilinged place, well built by the genial, canny Marty Mount to withstand cold or heat. Two glowing stoves were apple-red and the lamps burned, for it was night when Cam Mitchell came to this last meeting place with the men of the country of his last defeat. There was a bar and tables for drinking in company or for playing poker. Men lined the bar and sat about, thawing, talking of the freeze. Their voices were low, and Mitch reflected momentarily that others had suffered loss too, through death of their cattle. But none had been cleaned out, for the Valley was prosperous—all this country was

rich. That was why Mitch had fought so tenaciously to get a foothold here.

Marty, a graying man, stout and mustached, said, "How come, Mitch? You oughta be on your place, hadn't yuh? Them steers'll need help if they drift off the tableland."

Mitch fumbled, unloosed his belt, found a gold piece. His voice was hoarse. "For the house, Marty. The Injuns got the herd yesterday."

Porter was there, smiling, huge, a rich man with cowboys to do his bidding and his hard work. Decker and Porter were there to play a little poker, and kill time until the freeze was over. Slavin, the feed man from town, who owned the bank, was with them. They glanced curiously at Mitch, seeking to see how he was taking the loss. The others, the lesser men, exclaimed in sympathy or shrugged because they neither knew nor liked Mitch, the loner. They all drank.

It was a moment or two before Mitch could get accustomed to the warmth, the light of the bar. He drained his whiskey, standing alone at the end of the counter, and when he had it down he felt the restraint, even among Porter, Decker and Slavin. Then it hit him strong and he raised his thawing eyebrows at Marty, seeing the catlike man at the deal table beyond the bar, the man with the black city coat and polished black city boots.

Marty said under his breath. "Yeah. It's Ragsdale. He's got us treed, for sure. Shot down his own sidekick last night. Rode in just afore the freeze, on his way to Denver. Sore as a bear 'cause he's laid up here."

"He kill the man? That would make twenty-odd," said Mitch.

"Man's alive, but he don't know it," whispered Marty. "I got him hid out. A little old guy. Rags shot him like he was a dog and mangy to boot. Over nothin'."

Marty said, "Rags Ragsdale. I knew him in Dodge. But he didn't know me. I

stayed clear of him. He could outshoot any of 'em. He's plain poison and half-loco."

"Everybody's scared. The Marshal ain't in town—got snowed in at Bear Peak. This place ain't a gunslinger's town. This country's got fairly fat—and tame. These men got women to home." Marty was muttering half to himself.

Cam Mitchell nodded. "I ain't slung a gun in ten years. Been too busy workin'. Man's hands get calloused, cut up—he can't go against gunmen."

"Nobody's goin' agin Ragsdale. But he's rarin' for action. Man like him, he don't give a continental. Like a loco bronc. Rest of us, we got families, a stake in the country. Not him. He fattens off us when he kin, ropes in tenderfeet rest of the time. He travels light and don't give a hoot from Sunday."

Mitch said, "Gimme another shot, Marty." He was looking at Rags Ragsdale and hating the man. The famed gunslinger was everything Marty had said and more. He had never done a day's work in his life, yet there he sat, sleek and well fed, his pockets full of money, hat cocked to one side, sneering at his betters.

Ragsdale's voice broke sharply into the hushed atmosphere. "I crave action. Porter—Decker—Slavin. How about a real game? You got the money—put it up. I'll match you!" He thumped a poke of coins that rattled heavily on the tabletop. "Damn it, the country's gone to hell. Everybody's scared, yella! Gamble a little, why don't ya? What the hell else is there to do?"

Porter said heavily, "I'm not of a mind to play poker."

THE others sat stolid, silent, following the lead of Porter. Ragsdale arose, a lightfooted man with a thin line of dark hair across his upper lip, a diamond pin in his shirt bosom, a grin like the devil's own across his dark vis-

age. He said, "I'm of a mind to play. Nice, five-handed game, table stakes. One more player, we need. Lemme look around."

He straightened, his smirking gaze flicking, never quite still, jumping to one man, then sliding off to another. Mitch felt himself move away from the bar, felt the beginning of an urge which fitted his plans so well he had scarcely to think it out. Mitch said, "I'm your man, Rags."

The gunman shifted his weight, whirling. His black eyes raked Mitch, his soft, strong white hand hung loose, near the butt of his Colt. He said, "Men don't call me 'Rags' unless they know me well enough so's I understand 'em."

Mitch removed his wool-lined coat. He took his revolver from a pocket within the lining and shoved it carelessly into the high waistband of his work pants. He said offhandedly, "In Dodge you wasn't so fussy, Rags. You were tough, but not fussy."

Ragsdale relaxed a jot from his deadliness. "You was in Dodge?"

"It was when Bat was Marshal," nodded Mitch. He smiled a little, saying no more, knowing Ragsdale would remember how he had left town without settling a small difference between him and the Masterson brothers, deliberately shoving it at Ragsdale, a little salt for an old wound.

"That's a while ago," said Ragsdale.

"Things have sure changed in Dodge."

"Yeah," shrugged Mitch. "What about that poker game?"

Porter, Slavin, Decker moved quickly now. They had felt it, of course, as men in close quarters, confined together by the elements, are quick to sense every mood and emotion. They had recognized with wonder the challenge in Mitch's attitude. They were astounded that Ragsdale had not shot Mitch down without palaver; since he had not, they were willing, hope rising within them, to play along with whatever Mitch meant to try.

They would lend their presence, but no more, Mitch knew. These men had money, were satisfied with life. They had dependents, they had land and buildings and men working for them. They were quick enough to allow Cam Mitchell, the lone rancher from the hills who had just lost his all, to take a lead and catch whatever Ragsdale might choose to administer. Then they would jump Ragsdale, after Mitch was downed, before Rags could turn on them—they would be able to do that, the big men, watching for just such a chance. By that time Cam Mitchell would be bleeding out his life on Marty Mount's unclean floor.

Well, it was a way to make an end of it, of the hard luck and the sweat and toil and the letdown when things went smash, the inner hurt which he no longer cared to face. There was nothing of sacrifice in

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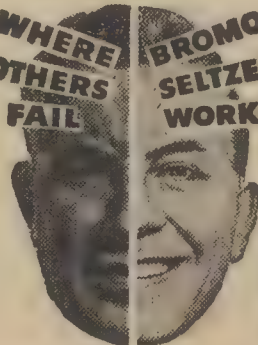
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him. He would not turn a hand to save Decker nor Porter nor Slavin from mulcting by the expert hand of Ragsdale. It merely suited him to put a period on it this way, with a little flourish to brighten the drab days he had wasted in this country trying to make his stake stand up.

The air in The Cisco Bar had grown close and fetid, but the men around the table did not notice it. The watchers were almost as rapt as the players. A small miracle was taking place and each person in the room was reacting to it in his own fashion.

Ragsdale said, "I open for twenty."

Mitch said, "Play along." His left hand was still scarred from a rope burn which had infected, and his handling of the chips was clumsy. It was easy for everyone to note this, because Mitch had handled a lot of chips in the last few hours.

It was nearing midnight, but no one had left to brave the freeze. Everyone was watching Mitch, wondering when the dam would break.

He had cashed chips three times. There was a pile before him which represented a thousand dollars at least. Slavin, Decker and Porter, caught up in the game, were hardfaced, sweating, playing with all the skill at their command, trying to break his run of luck.

Ragsdale too had been losing—not as much as the others, but enough to put his temper on edge. His voice had chilled, lowered, until every accent contained danger. When he had gone head and head with Mitch he had lost every time. His winning pots had been at the expense of the others.

At first it had amused him. He had railed at the rich men, goading them that a poor rancher off the mesa top should be the better poker player. He had treated Mitch as a partner, cheering his winnings over the others.

Then, confident in his own skill at his

chosen profession, he had attempted a gambit wherein three deuces were to seem like two pair built into a full house. Mitch, riding his luck, had drawn to a flush and made it. The results had been catastrophic to Ragsdale's pile.

There was nothing of great poker skill in Mitch's procedure. All Western men knew poker—he had played his share. But tonight it was luck and he knew it.

There was a great churning inside him as he mentally approximated the extent of his winnings. Enough to buy a new herd. Enough to start over.

The irony of it was not lost upon him. He had given up poker, all the pleasures of barrooms to sweat and labor and gain his freedom from want. He had slaved and slept and rolled his makin's and puffed them down to toil-hardened fingertips and lived no other life for two years in this country. All had been swept away by the two evil forces of the land—bad weather and Indians.

Now, in a few hours, sitting at a table, he had recouped all his losses and more besides. He looked at his cards—a pair of aces and useless nits and nats. Testing his luck, he asked for two cards, holding a trey, a pip he had always believed lucky for him.

Ragsdale had drawn one card. Porter took two, Slavin was out, Decker, the dealer, announced one to himself. Mitch shuffled the pasteboards. Silence hung heavy in the room.

Ragsdale said harshly, "Bet fifty."

Mitch peered at his draw. One trey . . . another ace!

It was unbelievable, but he knew better than to allow a trace of it to show in his lean face. He said tentatively, "I'll jest boost it a mite—twenty."

Porter said shortly, "Gotta look." Porter was able to lose but hated to. He had thought this would turn out differently, that Mitch would soon lose his stake and that the spark between Mitch and Rags-

dale could be fanned until the town would profit.

Decker said, "I didn't make it. I drop."

Ragsdale said, "Raise a hundred."

One card, thought Mitch, he bought one card. A flush? Another full house? He filled something or he wouldn't be betting into a raise like that.

Mitch said, "Make it five hundred, Rags."

He could have bitten off his tongue for using the nickname. He saw the yellow light leap in Ragsdale's eyes, saw the slight tremor of the hand which played with stacked chips. Ragsdale was on him now. The heat was glowing in the gunman. Mitch had made two mistakes—he had called Ragsdale, then he had won his money. Out of these could come nothing but an encounter, and out of that could come only one thing—death.

Mitch knew himself. He was no gunslinger. Ragsdale could kill him where he sat, without moving. The others might get the gunslinger immediately thereafter, but that would never deter Ragsdale. He was, as Mitch had pointed out, part loco. When the urge was on him he killed, not heeding the consequences.

Ragsdale said through his white teeth. "You been mighty lucky. Or somethin'." He paused significantly, looking around at the others, then at Mitch's hands. It was obviously ridiculous. The greatest card sharper in the world could not manipulate a deck if his hands were as broken and scarred as Mitch's. But it gave Ragsdale a peg on which to hang his attack. "I call."

Mitch said calmly, "Aces—full of treys." His own voice sounded faraway, however it might strike the others. He was watching Ragsdale's hands. They quivered clutching the cards, and Mitch knew he had won another pot, a small fortune to him. He sat quietly, waiting for Ragsdale to let go of his now useless heart flush which contained the fourth

ace. Spiking up that trey-spot had done it, one part of his mind exulted while another section waited out Ragsdale's move.

THE gunman was going to do or say something, that was certain. There was no question in anyone's mind as to that. Marty Mount came away from the bar and called, "Mitch. Could you leave the game for just a hand or two? Somethin' out here I wancha to he'p me with."

It was a blessed relief. Mitch fought to refrain from trembling as he shoved back his chair. He left his chips, muttering an apology, hastening away toward the back of the barroom. He knew that Ragsdale was left with ugly words hanging in his teeth. He knew the gunman had swiveled his chair, scraping it on the floor, to keep him in view as he followed Marty.

The barkeep was sweating like a bull. He whispered, "Can't you slip out, fork yore bronc and make it to the hills? Yore cabin is strong. Man, you got enough in your pockets to see yuh through two years without the winnin's on the table."

Mitch said, "He'll start a ruckus. He's bound to, now. If I went, he might pick on you. He's rarin' to go, now."

Marty said, "I'm yore friend, Mitch, but I'm scared to cut down on him without no reason. I'm mortal sure he's goin' after yuh, but if I got him from behind I couldn't sleep nights. Take it outen the back and cut for home, and I'll face him. I got me a greener behind the door there. I'll buck him. It's a stinkin' shame he should down yuh now, when yuh got another stake."

Mitch surveyed the rubicund bar owner. "That's neighborly of yuh, Marty. Seems like I never 'preciated you as a friend before."

Marty did not meet his gaze. He murmured, "Man works hard, minds his business, he's got more friends than he thinks. Every man jack in' here tonight

is happy you're winnin' from Porter and them. Everybody hates it you should've lost your herd after all your work."

"Yeah." Mitch traced a pattern on the board floor with the toe of his boot. He would have felt the same way himself, he realized now, if a neighbor had suffered the loss he had undergone. People didn't always talk a lot, but they would feel like that, when he came to study it. He said slowly, Rags is goin' to cause trouble. No matter what, he's goin' to do it. I can't run, Marty. Not now. I'd give my eye teeth and one arm to run. But I can't."

After a moment Marty said, "Reckon you can't at that, Mitch."

They were around the edge of a partition, out of sight of the players for the moment. A mewling sound came from behind a door and Marty moved quickly, going to it. He whispered, "Shut up in there! Ragsdale's right in the bar, playin' poker."

Mitch remembered the wounded partner who had been shot down by Ragsdale. He moved closer to Marty, listening.

A ghostly voice said, "That there is Cam Mitchell. Howzit, Cammy ole kid?"

In a second Mitch had opened the door and swung inside the room. A lamp flickered low, but he could see the gaunt, wasted, yet somehow merry features of the man on the bunk. Marty had bandaged the man's neck and right shoulder and his head sat at an odd angle on his narrow shoulders, but Mitch knew him.

"Wirey Willow! Hell, man, you died with Custer."

The wounded man's mouth turned down, some of the humor departed from him. "Yuh know better'n thet."

Mitch said, "I never wanted to think wrong, Wirey."

"Naw. Yuh never did." Willow's mouth twisted. "I never seen Custer. It was too close. I might have got to him. But I might not've. So I never went."

There was silence in the room. Then

Mitch said, "You was always honest about things. And you might not have made it."

"Honest? Me?"

"So far as I was concerned," said Mitch. "You was honest."

Wirey Willow regarded him comically. At the door Marty called, "Ragsdale is hollerin' for yuh, Mitch. He wants the big winner back in the game. He's liable to start back here lookin' for yuh."

Wirey said, "So you're in a game with Rags? Yuh never did have much sense, Mitch. You was a good boy, but not smart."

"I know," said Mitch humbly. "Now I'm way ahead of him and he's riled."

Wirey said, "He'll down yuh like he done me. He thinks I'm dead and on ice, he does! He's a devil, boy, I'm a-tellin' yuh."

"He sure is," said Mitch, smiling feebly. "Well, I got to go back, Wirey. nice to of seen you again."

"Sure . . . sure." Wirey grinned. "Yuh always was a polite, dumb boy. And square. Goodby, Cammy."

Back in the bar, Mitch said, "It's mighty cold outside, ain't it, Marty? Take care of old Wirey. Take some of my money if anything happens and take good care of him."

Marty said, "Mitch, you shouldn't go back. You could git away."

"And leave you in it? And the other fellas around here? This freeze will last a week. Rags would clean out the town in a week."

"Someone'll jump him. Sooner or later—"

"Let him get started and no one'll ever jump him. He made you all stand aside when he downed Wirey," Mitch said. "He'll git the town on the run and never let up.—No, Marty. I'll stay with him."

It was the hardest thing he had ever done. All the other trials and tribulations were as nothing compared to this. With

more money than he had ever imagined he would own heavy in his pockets, he had to walk the long length of The Cisco Bar and return to his seat at that poker table. It was the journey to death and he was acutely aware of it, every step.

It was, when he got past the fear and the heat of it and looked at it detachedly, just another part of the plan of his life. It had always been the same. He worked, made his start, saw daylight ahead—and then something happened. He had gone into this thing with his eyes opened, expecting gunfire, expecting to be downed, hoping only to take the sneering, hateful Ragsdale with him. The slight switch in the pattern which had brought him the winnings from the game made no appreciable difference.

After all, he had never let go until forced to by circumstances. Not until today he hadn't. Today he had loosened his grip, beaten down at last. The money in his pocket, he thought, had only been loaned to him, maybe as a lesson, a last lesson to show him that a man should never give up.

Again he caught himself looking upward, a habit engendered at his mother's side too many years ago, he supposed. He kept on walking to his place, sat down. He longed to adjust the revolver, bring the butt near his hand. But if he did this it would be an aggressive move and he could see the impatience in Ragsdale and

knew the gunfighter would welcome such an opportunity to open the ball.

He fingered the chips, the red, white and blue counters which could spell independence to him. He slid his eyes around to Porter, Slavin, Decker, saw them fail to meet his gaze lest he be pleading to them for aid. They would duck and let him take it, he well knew. Marty would probably get Ragsdale, but Mitch would be a corpse by then.

Wirey would be dead soon. He had seen death just over Wirey's shoulder. A .45 ploughing into the chest and going deep and not coming out would always kill a man unless he was lucky. Wirey was not a lucky man, no more than was Mitch.

Ragsdale was dealing. He said harshly, "'Bout time yuh gave us a chance to even up. Yuh can't be lucky all night, yuh know. Not dealin' off the top, yuh can't."

It was coming and there was nothing he could do about it, Mitch knew. He looked at his cards, his lips tightening. The set of his jaw altered a bit. Mitch was coming down to it, and when he did he had a way of sticking.

He said, "I'll open and take three and to hell with you."

RAGSDALE'S eyes changed from yellow to a pale mud color. He waited until Porter played and Slavin dropped with Decker. Then he

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said, "I'll raise five hundred before you get them three tickets to wherever you're goin', Mitchell."

Mitch said, "I'll see the raise and still take three cards."

Ragsdale dealt him the three and they were off the top, too. The gunman scorned cheating. He had other ways of dominating a game. Porter took three also. Ragsdale took one card and sat straight, slightly turned away from the table, his gun within easy reach of his right hand, the cards held tightly in his left.

Mitch edged out his draw. It was not even surprising when he found that he held four kings. He said, "I tap your stack, Porter—and you, Rags."

He laid the cards face down on the table and placed a chip on them. He shoved back from the others, placing himself a bit away from the table by pivoting one leg of the chair. He waited there, shoulders slightly humped, his eyes on Ragsdale.

Porter said faintly, "Not me you don't tap. You been too lucky for me to buck you."

Ragsdale sneered, "He bought three. What can he have? I'm callin' you, Mitchell, and I'm sportin' a full house this time!"

He could save himself now, or at least win a reprieve, Mitch suddenly knew. Ragsdale was money hungry. It was a whale of a pot. The stack before Ragsdale amounted to nearly a thousand dollars. All Mitch had to do was let Rags win, fold his hand into the deck, sit back and wait it out. The lust for gold was a step ahead of the lust for blood in the gunman.

He laughed a little. He said, "Rags, you're sure a caution. You don't know enough to let a man ride when he's got the luck with him. You're a plain sucker, Rags."

He flipped over his cards, using his left

hand. The four kings slid across the table and came to rest beneath the eyes of the gunman. Ragsdale stared at them in wild disbelief.

He was shoving back his chair then, a needless gesture, for he had the revolver in his hand. He crouched, off the chair, his head thrust forward, the gun still in its holster, but his hand on the butt. He had to talk a little, Mitch thought in wonder. Maybe because of all the men in the place, maybe because of the rawness of the deal, maybe because he distrusted Marty and wanted to keep the bar owner in view.

He was smart, Ragsdale, maneuvering so that everyone was where he could keep watch. His voice crackled now, "If anyone wants in on this, I'm ready to accommodate him. I'm choosin' Mitchell. He's got cards up his sleeve or somethin'. No man could be that lucky. I'm choosin' him for that reason, and if anyone thinks it ain't a square shootout, let him chip in. I'm takin' all comers in this and you gents know me, Ragsdale! Mitchell! Go for your gun, you rat!"

He hurled the epithet at Mitch. A younger man, or one less used to the ways of such as Ragsdale, might have started to draw and then Rags, working coolly, would have shot him. Mitch made a sideways step, crabbing toward the rear of the barroom, grinning a little. Because he did not go for the revolver in his waistband and because his grin seemed confident—although it was not—Ragsdale hesitated.

"Go for it, afore I cut yuh down!" Ragsdale shouted. The yellow had returned to his eyes and his back was arched, so that in his black coat he resembled a huge panther about to spring.

"Why, sure, Rags," said Mitch. He made another move, leaping sideways. His hand went to the gun in his belt. He could have got it out, he thought in a painfully clear flash of knowledge, had it not been for his work-hardened hands.

He might even have got in a shot, because Ragsdale drew and fired.

And Ragsdale missed with his first shot. Marty yelled and ducked, running for the greener, and a couple of other men barked something or other when they sensed the first shot of the gunslinger had not found its mark. But Mitch's hand was too stiff and he could not thumb back the hammer fast enough and to move again would be no good, he knew.

A voice croaked, "Okay, Rags. This here way."

The second shot crashed as Mitch tried to get up his gun. It burned through his shirt and crisped along the muscles of his shoulder. But he only staggered and then he got the old Colt working. He leveled it down, seeing Ragsdale's sudden fear, the jerk in Ragsdale's hand as the voice came again.

"I'm a-huntin' you, Rags. You're doomed to hell with me."

Mitch released the first shot. He held steady, remembering Earp's advice to make the shots count without haste, to let the other man be swift while you were accurate, holding the muzzle on Ragsdale's middle, letting loose another shot, and another.

He saw Ragsdale bend double, throwing the gun from him. He had shot for the belt buckle and now Ragsdale was folding over, trying to see past Mitch, to the rear of the barroom, going down the hard way, a bit at a time. The voice of Wirey Willow said again, "In hell, Rags. It's hot there—you won't feel the big freeze there!" Wirey chuckled, just like Mitch remembered. The fear was stamped on Ragsdale's face even after he died.

Wirey made a few steps toward the bar. He said cheerfully, "Yuh oughta set us up after that, Cammy . . . if I'd 'a had a hawg-leg, I woulda got him for yuh. Like it is, you did a good job for a real dumb kid."

The skinny little man got a hand on the bar and winked impudently at Mitch. He said, "You'll be top dog around here now, son. This bunch sure got to take off their hats to yuh. Well, yuh goin' to buy?"

Mitch said numbly, "You ought to be in bed, Wirey!"

Wirey said, "I shoulda been with Custer. Yuh know that, Mitch. That's where I shoulda been."

He pitched forward then and Mitch caught him and willing hands bore him tenderly back to the bunk he had crawled from to save the life of Cam Mitchell and pay back a score to Ragsdale. He would never get up alive again, Mitch knew.

He stood there, waiting for Marty to serve the whiskey. The money was heavy in his pockets, the chips piled on the table represented his victory. He looked at Porter, Slavin, Decker. He said mildly, "I got no call to throw off on you gents. I asked for it from Rags. I'd just admire to start another herd and be a neighbor."

Porter said, "I got a bull you can have cheap. I got some good Herefords'll weather this freeze."

The others nodded. There was relief in them and liking for Mitch and admiration. He basked in it, suddenly aware that, despite the heat in The Cisco Bar, he had not gotten warm all the way through until just now. Now he was warm, right to the middle, even before he took his drink.

DEADWOOD, South Dakota, still breeds 'em tough. Mike Turning Bear, a Sioux, charged with stealing twenty horses, was asked to plead guilty or not guilty.

Laconically Mike said, "Twenty-one."

—Joseph Allen.

He exploded through the mass of splintered wood into the room above. . . .



THE DEVIL AT DANCING DUNES

By ROD PATTERSON

It took ten men's brawn to wrest a living out of Dancing Dunes, Johnny knew—but it took pure brains to die!

JOHNNY SCHUTT stared down at the corpse and thought he was dreaming. He nudged the body with a boot and saw hay dust puff up in the light of his lantern. Then he kicked at the dead man, slowly, deliberately, because it seemed the only way to express his anger and despair. After a while he bent closer and turned the body over on its back. The

face was gray in death, the eyes wide and sightlessly staring. There was a splotch of dried blood on the man's shirt. He had been shot through the heart.

"Damn you, damn you!" Johnny yelled. "Why'd you have to git killed here?"

The barn echoed his words hollowly, startlingly. He put his lantern on the floor

and sat down on an upended box. The anger faded from his consciousness and was replaced by fear. "Now I gotta tell the sheriff and they'll blame me for another killin'!" His blue, bland eyes narrowed with a sudden thought. "Why have I gotta tell? Why?"

He scowled with the effort of trying to think. Thinking made his head hurt. He took off his hat and gingerly fingered the scar that marked his mop of unruly red-brown hair like a transverse part. The scar was a memento of the fight he'd gotten into down at Alder Forks six months ago. He had killed a man with his fists in that brawl before a bullet had creased his skull. He had been flat on his back eight weeks from that wound, and when he recovered something had gone wrong with his mind.

The sawbones had said he'd never be right in the head again, but Midge kept telling Johnny it didn't matter. Midge had been the cause of the fight in Monte Jelke's Casino that day. She had been a dancehall girl. Now she was Johnny's wife, and he was very proud of her.

Sheriff Amiel Cluff had arrested Johnny for killing the Circle Dot cowboy, but had let him go free when Midge swore she would keep him out of trouble in the future. Everybody figured Johnny had gone loony and you couldn't hang such a man. Only one person protested when the sheriff released Johnny—Juke Bozeman, the boss of the dead cowhand.

Johnny was as big as a full-grown grizzly. He stood six feet two in his socks, with massive shoulders and chest and short powerful arms. He had strength enough to wrestle a mule to the ground and many had seen him do it, too. He was a dogieman, a rancher who raised and sold beef cattle to other ranchers. One of those he sold to was Juke Bozeman. The owner of Circle-Dot had had his eye on Johnny's grass in the Dancing Dunes for a long time. It was the finest

grass in that part of Texas, and Bozeman wanted it for his herds and his every act was aimed at taking it away from Johnny Schutt. He had started the fight in the saloon that day, hoping to get Johnny locked up in jail for long enough so he could move in on Johnny's range.

Now Johnny sat on the box as daylight brightened in the barn's wide-open door. What was a dead man doing in his barn? It didn't make sense. But then, very little made sense to Johnny lately. He put his hat back on his head and stood up, moving to the door, where he peered out cautiously.

It was a dark gray morning with a thin mist that threatened to turn into a dense fog. The Dancing Dunes lay along the floor of a narrow valley. It was bottom-land and, after a rain, fog often closed in like a thick and smothering blanket. It had rained during the night. Water still dripped from the barn roof and from the mesquite trees in the ranchyard.

A hundred feet away, a wisp of smoke curled up from the mud-and-stick chimney of the small plank-sided ranch house. Johnny imagined that Midge would be in the kitchen, getting breakfast on the brand new cooking stove. Thinking about his wife gave him a warm and grateful feeling all through him. Somehow, he had to get rid of the dead man without telling her.

He went around the corner of the barn, looking for a place to hide the body. There was no place visible. He started back toward the barn door. A voice said, "Johnny, what's the matter?"

Midge stood before him, drying her hands on her apron. She had left the house and had crossed the yard without his knowing it. He stared at her stupidly through the white drifting mist, not speaking, too startled to speak.

A tall, thin woman of thirty, Midge had once been pretty. There were dim traces of beauty on her face still. Her yellow

hair was faded and stringy with dampness, and tiny wrinkles showed in clusters at her mouth and at the corners of her melancholy eyes. They were dark eyes, not blue as might be expected in a blonde.

Midge looked at her burly husband and spoke gently. "What's wrong, Johnny? Why you walking around like a lost soul?"

"Ain't lost," Johnny replied with a sheepish grin. He tried to think of something else to say, but his head hurt and he stood before her, grinning like a kid caught redhanded at some deviltry.

Midge said sternly, "Come into the house. I want to talk to you."

She turned and walked toward the gallery with Johnny ambling behind her. They crossed the gallery and entered the warm-smelling kitchen. There Midge faced him again, her hands on her narrow hips. "Well, now tell me what's the matter," she said severely.

He coughed, embarrassed, then blurted, "They's a dead man in the barn!"

She staggered as though he had struck her, then went white to the lips. "Who is it?" she finally managed to ask in a faint voice.

He shook his head and shrugged. "Dunno."

There was a tense silence. Then Midge whispered, "Johnny, do you remember the fight at Jelke's?"

"Yeah."

"Remember Juke Bozeman?" She was shaking visibly.

He laughed. "That stiff ain't Bozeman. Wish't it was!"

"You hit Bozeman," she said slowly in a tone that was terribly suppressed. "You broke his jaw and flattened his nose—all in one punch! Then you hit his foreman and killed him!"

Johnny lifted his arms and stared at his fists. "Yeah," he murmured, "I remember."

"But you don't remember why you

started that fight and broke Jake's nose."

"No. Why?"

"Because Bozeman called me names," Midge told him, turning around as she spoke. There were tears in her eyes now, and her mouth trembled. "He called me a—"

Johnny jumped off his chair and went to her. He grabbed her thin arms in his big hands and gently shook her. "Don't never say it," he warned. "You couldn't help it because you had to work in a saloon. I—"

She shook off his hands, impatient suddenly. "Johnny, we're in trouble." She stared up into his eyes, then wheeled toward the door. "You stay here. I'm going out to see who he is—the dead man."

Johnny stood motionless, staring vacantly after her. Presently Midge came rushing breathlessly back. "Johnny!" she gasped, "it's Sam Grimes! It's the deputy sheriff they just swore in!"

Johnny didn't answer. He stood in the low-ceilinged room and stared like a man stunned witless. Then Midge was crying. Her sobs came soft and despairing. The sound turned Johnny's insides to quivering jelly. "It ain't nuthin' to cry about," he said with harsh urgency. "I didn't kill him, Midge!"

SHE choked back the sobs and dabbed at her eyes. When she spoke again it was in a calmer, quieter voice. "Johnny, somebody killed Grimes and put him in our barn to bait a trap! Bozeman swore he'd get you hanged, and Bozeman wants our grass!"

Some of her panic was transmitted to Johnny. He blinked and said, "Midge, we gotta git that dead man out of the barn in a hurry! The sheriff'll be ridin' in here any minute!"

"We can't bury him!" Midge gasped. "They'd find him sure!"

He stood staring down at her, trying to think. His head ached with the effort.

"I'll put him in the well," he said finally. "The sheriff wouldn't look down there."

Midge waved the suggestion away, her thin face contorted with anxiety. "No, Johnny. There must be some other way—" She broke off, saying, "Tote him in the house, Johnny. I've got an idea!"

Johnny turned and shambled out of the kitchen and back to the barn. Half way across the yard, he pulled up short, staring beyond the corrals. Then he turned and called to Midge. "His hoss is yonder."

Midge came to the door. "Get the horse after you bring him in," she said.

Johnny went on and entered the barn. The corpse was harder to carry than Johnny had imagined, due of course to the stiffness of it. Grimes had been dead for hours, perhaps since the middle of the night. Johnny finally got the body outside the barn. He half carried, half dragged it toward the cabin.

Midge was waiting on the gallery. Her voice was crisp with authority. "Carry him in the kitchen and take his clothes off! Then bring his horse! Hurry, Johnny!"

Johnny obeyed. He grabbed the body by the collar and hauled it through the doorway. He dragged the dead man into the kitchen and placed it face up on the floor. Then he went to work. He didn't ask questions. He was too deeply bewildered to think of anything except to do as Midge ordered. The deputy was wearing a brown coat and black trousers. He was a wiry man, with bony joints and a flat chest and big hands and feet. Johnny stripped the body of its outer garments and threw everything on the floor near the stove.

Then Midge came in. She had found the dead man's hat, a sombrero with silver conchas dangling from its sweeping brim. Not speaking, she gathered up the clothing and disappeared in the bedroom. "Lead his horse up to the house," she or-

dered her husband sharply. "Hurry!"

Johnny tried to puzzle out what Midge was up to, but gave it up. He left the cabin, and when he came back pulling the deputy's bay pony by the reins, he saw a man standing in the kitchen door. He tensed and stared, then saw that it wasn't a man—it was Midge dressed in the deputy's coat and pants. While Johnny stared, she put on the sombrero and pulled it down by the brim all the way around. The hat covered her hair and shaded her face.

"Johnny, I'm going to ride past the Hammond ranch, so I'll be seen," Midge said very slowly, in the tone a woman might use on a boy not quick to understand. "If the sheriff rides in, tell him you saw Sam Grimes head south a while ago. Don't say anything more, you understand? Just tell him you saw Grimes about an hour ago."

Johnny nodded numbly. "Sure, Midge. Only—"

"Hide him!" Midge motioned to the corpse in underwear and riding boots. "Hide him good! But not near the barn! Then you stay in the house!"

"Not near the barn," he repeated, nodding. "Sure, Midge. I'll hide him good."

Midge went out then, closing the door behind her very softly, as if afraid to make a loud noise. Johnny stared at the closed door. Then he glanced down at the dead deputy. "Damn you!" he whispered. "I'll hide you all right—where even the coyotes won't find you!"

His blue eyes swung around the room. He smiled when he saw the coffeepot steaming on the range. He got a tin cup off the shelf and filled it carefully and then went to a chair and sat down. While he gulped the black brew savoringly, he stared at the corpse. Where to hide him? The bedroom? He put the cup on the floor and walked into the room that opened off the kitchen. The few clothes they owed hung on nails behind a gingham

curtain on the wall. Except for a straight-backed chair and an old pine bureau, the iron-posted bed was the only furniture. He decided against hiding the body under the bed. Then he remembered the trapdoor near the stove in the kitchen.

He went back to the kitchen and got down on his knees. There was an iron ring bolted into the trapdoor. He tugged at it and the scuttle came up. Below was a dank cellar, hardly larger than a hole. He and Midge stored potatoes down there. A musty smell rose to his nostrils. Now he did not hesitate, but hurriedly grasped the dead man by the ankles and hauled him toward the trapdoor's opening. He dumped the corpse head first through it, then lowered the scuttle and put a chair on it. He sighed, pleased with the job.

Then he started and looked toward the door. Boots were moving on the gallery outside. Saddle gear clinked in the doorway, and a voice said, "Open up, Schutt!" and a fist hammered the door.

Johnny advanced on the door, walking on his toes. He put a big hand on the latch string and then didn't move for a long moment. The voice he had heard belonged to Sheriff Amiel Cluff, and now it spoke again, harshly, sternly.

"Open up, Johnny! We want to talk to you!"

Johnny opened the door.

Fog swirled on the gallery and in the yard beyond. It made all objects hazy and indistinct. Johnny saw the tall man on the gallery, saw a shifting scene of horsemen in the yard and heard the clink of bridle rings and the rumble of men's voices. The man facing Johnny on the gallery was Sheriff Cluff, a rawboned, elderly man with narrowed eyes and a set of sweeping tawny mustaches. Cluff had his right hand on his belted gun and he said, not unkindly, "Johnny, I'm lookin' for one of my men. Sam Grimes. I sent him out here on a complaint. Yest'd'y it was. He ain't been seen since."

Johnny didn't answer right away. It took time for the sheriff's remarks to sink into his befuddled mind. Finally he said, "Ain't seen nobuddy, but that deppity he rode through 'bout an hour ago."

Sheriff Cluff started visibly, then peered closer, harder, through the drifting fog on the gallery. "You talk to him, Johnny?"

Johnny nodded. "Some."

Cluff let this hand fall away from his gun. "Which way'd he ride, son?"

"Thataway." Johnny pointed southward beyond the almost invisible barn. The fog was closing in like a solid, streaming curtain of dirty white.

The sheriff said, "Juke Bozeman made a complaint you been stealin' his calves. That's why I sent Grimes out."

A hard knot of hatred began to form inside of Johnny. "Bozeman's a liar!" he breathed in a wrathful tone. So the Circle Dot boss was behind all this, as Midge had said. He scowled at the sheriff. "Bozeman's a liar," he repeated.

"Mebbeso," said the sheriff. "We'll see." He thought a moment, then said, "Jest checkin', Johnny. What kind of clothes did Grimes have on when he left here?"

A gleam of cunning flickered in Johnny's eyes. The sheriff thought he was dumb, hey? He drew his brows together, as if trying to think, to remember. "It was a brown coat and black pants," he said finally. "And one of them there Mex hats with silver dofunnies on 'er."

Cluff gave a deep and troubled sigh. "That's Sam, all right," he said, and turned back into the fog-shrouded yard.

JOHNNY watched the posse ride out of the yard. Then there was only the fog and the silence. He closed the door and went back to his chair on the trapdoor. He took off his hat and gently touched the scar. His head hurt agonizingly. He didn't want to have to think any more. He just wanted to sit still and

wait for Midge, who would make it right.

An hour passed without Johnny sensing the drift of time. During that interval he sat without consciously moving. When he did happen to stir, he did so merely because his muscles reacted of their own accord against remaining too long in one position.

Then he heard a boot knock a board on the gallery. Slowly, silently, he rose to his feet. Maybe that was Midge—or the sheriff come back. Maybe—he walked to the door and jerked it open.

A squat-bodied man with a swarthy face stood facing him on the gallery. Fog moved like smoke between them, destroying reality. Juke Bozeman might actually have been the Devil himself standing in the boiling hotbed of Hell. The man had pale, small, glittering eyes. His nose had been broken and was marked by a livid red scar.

There were two other men with Bozeman—both Circle Dot riders—who stood behind the squat man and stared malignantly through the fog, their eyes slitted and queerly shining. One of these riders was a punk kid with shift, colorless eyes and a damp, blonde curl of yellowish hair sticking out over his sloping forehead from under the brim of his black hat. The other man was a murderous cadaver of an oldtimer, deadly, vicious, with skin like cactus and a mouth like a trap.

But Bozeman's eyes were killer's eyes.

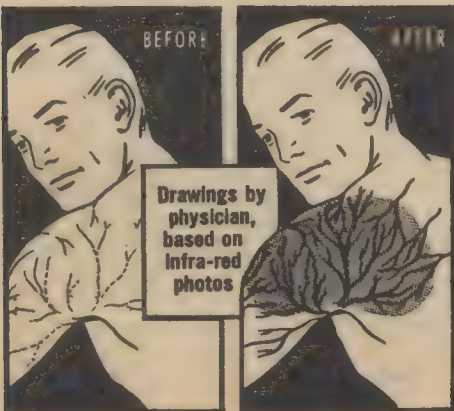
They were as pale as the fog that swirled around him. He hated Johnny beyond all reason. That hate was there in his eyes. The heavy blue-steel six-shooter in his right hand stayed on Johnny's chest.

"Go in and sit down, Johnny," Bozeman invited in a voice that made goose-flesh rise along Johnny's spine. "Me and the boys want to have a little talk." He wagged the barrel of his gun. The two men behind him nodded silently and Johnny saw the guns in their hands, too. "No tricks," Bozeman warned, remembering Johnny's bearlike strength and agility. "I got soft-nose bullets in this gun!"

Sweat beaded Johnny's upper lip. He slowly backed into the kitchen and sat down on the chair near the stove, over the trap door. He squinted at the three men who came in off the gallery with their guns angling toward him.

The kid with the yellow curl on his forehead glided across the room and glanced into the bedroom. Then he posted himself somewhere beyond Johnny's line of vision. The vicious-looking oldtimer remained in the open doorway where he could divide his attention between the yard and the kitchen. Bozeman sat down in a chair opposite Johnny's, but a safe ten feet away. He rested the black bone butt of his six-gun on a saddle-whitened knee. "What'd you do with the deputy, Johnny?" he asked harshly,

Johnny's broad-boned face showed sur-



HOW SLOAN'S LINIMENT AIDS ARTHRITIS PAINS

Working with infra-red photography, science has now demonstrated why Sloan's Liniment is so amazingly effective in helping to bring blessed relief from rheumatic pains and muscular aches. Infra-red photos (see illustration at left) disclose that, after Sloan's is applied to the skin, veins *below the surface* are expanded . . . evidence that an *extra* supply of blood has been brought to the pain area, to revitalize the painful tissues and hasten the removal of waste matter and poisons.

When you use Sloan's Liniment, you know that it is increasing the all-important flow of blood to the treated area, and that this effect *extends below the skin-surface*. No wonder Sloan's helps to bring blessed relief from rheumatic aches, arthritis pains, lumbago and sore muscles. No wonder Sloan's has been called "the greatest name in pain relieving liniments." Get a bottle today.

prise. "I don't know nuthin' about no depity," he retorted, frowning darkly.

"You was in the barn this mornin', wasn't you?" Bozeman demanded suspiciously. "You had to feed the stock, didn't you?"

"Sure," said Johnny, a guarded look in his innocent eyes. "What about it?"

"What'd you do with the body?" Bozeman murmured, his eyes glittering like a snake's. "Where'd you put Sam Grimes?"

Johnny shook his head dumbly. But his heart was thudding loud enough for the three men to hear its beat. Sweat was trickling down his spine under his denim shirt. "Don't savvy about nobody named Grimes," he said, knotting and opening his massive hands.

"Where's that blonde—where's your wife?" Bozeman snapped.

"Gone to town," Johnny replied. "She won't be back till—"

"Let's save time and work on him," the old man in the doorway suddenly snarled. "He'll tell where he put that body if you sweat him a bit!"

Somewhere behind Johnny, the kid said, "Go on, Bozeman. We'll cover you."

But Bozeman sat motionless, staring steadily at Johnny. Bozeman's swarthy face showed indecision, suspicion, doubt.

Johnny said, "Pretty soon the sheriff'll be ridin' back. Mebbe he found this here Grimes fella you're talkin' about."

A muscle in Bozeman's right cheek knotted and then relaxed. "Johnny, you better talk. What'd you do with that body?"

"What body?" Johnny asked stupidly.

There was a swift step behind him. He started to turn his head, then the kid with the yellow curl hit him with his revolver barrel. The hard, cold metal cracked down viciously on the scar. Johnny toppled off his chair and sprawled out on the floor, knocked silly by the treacherous blow.

He lay twitching, pain jolting through

his body like an electric shock. His vision blurred and he had to lock to teeth to keep from groaning. Rage followed. It was like a sudden hot tempest inside of him. His throat ached; his mouth worked with quick spasms.

The kid with the gun snarled, "Talk, you fool! Tell where you hid that body!"

"I . . . got rid of it," Johnny choked. He rose on an elbow. Then his voice shook with rage and pain, which the three men immediately mistook for cowardice, for fear. "Don't hit me—"

The kid spat an oath and bent swiftly. The hard, cold muzzle of his six-gun rapped Johnny's scar again. Johnny stiffened out. His chin bumped the floor. His eyes closed; his breath caught in his throat. His arms and legs jerked with agony. But he dimly heard Bozeman's grating voice cry, "I bet he drug the body out in the brush somewheres!"

Then something began to happen in Johnny's brain. The haze was clearing slowly, like a fog lifting from a bog. Lights flashed through the haze like beacons set off to beckon him back to sanity. In that sequence of brief seconds a hundred impressions flickered in his mind. Memory came in sudden bursts, one image appearing and then fading before the next came. His mind was confusion, chaos, but out of that welter of thoughts and impressions the whole chain of events leading up to his fight in the saloon with Bozeman and his men took shape, not in their entirety but clearly enough to overwhelm him with wonderment. And then, abruptly, his mind went blank.

He cried out with desperation, fighting to remember, to grasp at coherence and understanding. But his head roared with the effort and with the agony of the pistol-whipping he had taken.

He lay still, on propped arms and elbows, his head dangling and wobbling from side to side, blood trickling out of his scalp and down the bridge of his nose.

Slowly then he brought his chin up an inch from the floor and looked toward the door. The vicious oldtimer had walked away from its opening. But there was movement there. Now everything swam into focus. Through the open door he saw that fog lay across the gallery.

Someone was moving toward the door from the yard, a vague figure that didn't hurry but came on, climbing to the gallery with a queer, stiff, swaying motion. Johnny felt coldness at the back of his neck. He raised his body on rigid arms that trembled—not much.

But Bozeman had sprung up from his chair and was staring, mouth open, at the form on the gallery wrapped in streamers of fog. Bozeman's men stood motionless against the wall, as if frozen by terror at the appearance of a ghost.

It was a ghost—the ghost of Deputy Sam Grimes!

The face was misted and indistinct, but they all saw the Mexican sombrero with its glittering silver conchas, saw the brown coat, the black trousers, the stringy body . . .

The apparition had materialized at such a critical moment that even Johnny forgot that Midge had disguised herself in Sam Grimes' suit and hat. On his hands and knees, he stared foolishly, his jaw sagging.

Bozeman and his men never moved or made a sound. They were too startled, too bewildered to move or speak. Then the figure in the doorway spoke. It was Midge's voice but Bozeman didn't recognize it because she made it sound like a man speaking, slowly, deeply, hoarsely. "The window, Johnny! Jump out the window!" And Midge's arms came up and she pointed with both hands. "Jump, Johnny!"

JOHNNY obeyed the command automatically. One moment he was on the floor, the next he had lunged upright. He spun to the right, staggering

Bozeman backward against the stove. With a single leap Johnny dove headfirst through the closed window. He struck in the yard, rolling. Glass crashed down upon him; a jagged splinter stuck in his back between the shoulders until his rolling knocked it out, but it left a fragment embedded in his flesh.

Wild yells went up inside the house to a frenzied pitch. Boots went kicking over the floor. A man fell with a crash and the stovepipe came clattering down. Johnny floundered toward the nearest cover, scrambling beneath the ell of the house that contained the bedroom and was built on cedar stakes driven into the ground. There was barely enough space under the ell for him to crawl. Huddled finally under the bedroom's plank floor, he waited and hardly breathed. He felt like a trapped animal. His mouth had turned as dry as talus dust.

Again he saw flashes of brilliant light before his eyes, but the lights were inside his skull. Then his mind washed clear. It was like blinding sunlight after a night of blackness and fear and futility. He was Johnny Schutt again—whole, complete, a man with the thoughts of reason, and the past was part of the present, all in one piece, lucid and continuous.

A feeling of tremendous elation swept him. It was like being born again. Even the dank smells under the ell seemed sharper, and his eyes saw things beyond the fog in the yard, things he had forgotten were there—a rainbarrel, a broken down moving machine, a pitchfork standing in the ground by its tines . . . and a pair of legs scissoring away into the gray mist of fog. They were Midge's legs in Sam Grimes' trousers!

Then he saw other legs sprinting out there, saw a tangle of figures wrestling and stamping in the yard. Three pairs of legs went back to the house, the middle pair dragging in the mud. Johnny gasped, "Midge!"

He heard Bozeman's voice growl, "We got her! Now we'll wait for Johnny! He'll come after her—don't worry!"

"Damn' right!" Johnny whispered savagely. He felt fine, good—but fury and weakness and jubilation held him momentarily as if paralyzed. He tried, but he couldn't move a muscle. "Midge, I'm comin'!" he gasped to himself. "Wait, Midge! Jest lemme git my legs to work and I'll help yuh!"

He cried out bitterly. Now his head was all right and his mind belonged to him again, but his body wouldn't answer to his will. He cursed and started crawling, but the floor overhead kept whacking his head and his arms wouldn't hold him up. He gave up and rolled over on his back, wheezing, cursing, sweating.

Above him in the bedroom, boots crashed the floor. "Damn you!" Bozeman hollered. "You little wildcat—" There was the sound of a slap, then a body fell hard against the floor.

"Midge!" Johnny gasped. Then he cursed Bozeman silently, terribly, remembering what Bozeman had tried to do to him, remembering everything that had happened, even the shock of the bullet that time in the saloon.

Blood stormed through his veins, throbbed at his temples. His ears roared—his head ached. But his brain was alive, not slumbering as it had been so long a time. His mind was clear and sharp and tingling. Then he heard noises above him, like somebody tearing out partitions. He got on his hands and knees again. He wasn't afraid to die for Midge!

And if he died, he'd take Bozeman with him!

The ground beneath the bedroom ell was barred with threads of light that filtered through the cracks between the floor planks. Johnny placed himself under the floor about in the center of the bedroom. Strength was slowly crawling into his body. Weakness was fading. He drew a

deep and shaking breath and braced his massive shoulders against the flooring.

He pushed gently at first, straddling wide with arms and knees, shoving upward with his back muscles. The floor planks made a cracking sound. Then he got knees and hands under him, gathered his muscles so that they rippled and then went taut.

He heaved with all the power in his body. There was a rending, tearing sound of snapped floor boards. Johnny exploded through a jagged mass of splintered wood into the bedroom above.

Yells dinned in his ears. He was facing a wall, bent over at the hips, gore on his shirt, splattering over his face, dripping off his nose and chin. He whipped himself around, his boots finding a solid footing beside the ragged hole in the floor. He saw Bozeman flat on his face, where he had fallen when Johnny burst up through the boards. Bozeman had dropped his gun and was madly scrambling about with hands to reach it. Johnny kicked him in the face. Bozeman's head cracked back hard enough to break his neck. He didn't move any more.

Boots hit the floor behind Johnny. He swung anxious eyes to see the kid with the yellow wing of hair on his forehead. The kid came at Johnny and sprawled over him, grappling frantically for a hold.

Johnny saw Midge then, in a corner, huddled on her knees, covering her face with her hands. She was swaying, sobbing. Then Johnny was fighting off the murderous kid. He broke forward at the hips and pitched the kid headlong over his head. The gunman crashed down near the window, rolling and trying to get his gun off his belt.

Johnny seized a chair and swung it in a short, vicious arc. The chair plummeted down, striking the kid a glancing blow. But the kid's gun was out. It spat a needle of orange flame.

The shot, as empty as the slamming of

a door, came with the shock of the bullet in Johnny's right side, down low. The impact spun him around and he stumbled to his knees. Another shot thundered. A haze of splinters fanned out of the floor near Johnny's right hand.

Then came Midge's scream, high and shrill, like the swift tearing of silk. It merged with the pain in Johnny's head and swam around and around in his skull, and he passed out cold and never felt his body hit the floor and straighten out.

When he came to his senses, he was alone. It was curiously dark in the room. Bozeman and the crazy kid had disappeared. So had Midge. Johnny smelled smoke. The house was lit with wriggling red light. Sparks fanned through the door that led to the kitchen.

Johnny got up, stumbled and fell and got up again. He staggered into the kitchen. The three men had gone, taking Midge with them. He groaned with anguish. He collapsed into a chair, the one that stood over the trap door. He stared dazedly at the flames that leaped up against the wall behind the stove. The potholes of the stove were uncovered. Someone had raked live coals of fire from the range and had scattered them in the wood box and around the room. The kitchen was blazing now. Johnny mind began working. A sudden thought came, and it filled him with power. Juke Bozeman wanted the body of Sam Grimes? All right, Bozeman would get it. And then he'd die, and if Johnny died too, that would be all right. When the sheriff came, he'd find Bozeman's body beside Grimes' and maybe alongside the bodies of the kid and the old man.

Johnny jumped off the chair and bent over the trapdoor. He found the iron ring, though he could not see it because of smoke that stung his eyes and made them stream water. He had forgotten his wounds. He had forgotten everything but his hatred of Bozeman and the maddened

determination to save Midge even if it killed him.

THE root cellar was in blackness below him. Johnny lowered himself into the gaping hole, landing on potato sacks and rubbish. He felt around in the damp darkness and found the corpse. He boosted the body up to the kitchen floor and clambered up after it. His legs felt pleasantly tired and he knew this came from loss of blood. He grabbed the body up in both arms and went staggering toward the gallery door. The flames roared and snapped behind him and smoke billowed out with him.

He held the corpse like a side of beef, awkwardly, gasping lungfuls of air and fog, teetering on his feet, feeling wobbly and sick, blinking the smoke sting out of his eyes.

Gradually he saw little eddies of fog swirling in the yard. The strengthening sun was breaking through the mist. Then he saw the three men. They had Midge. She stood between Bozeman and the kid, not twenty feet away from the gallery. Midge was staring at Johnny, her eyes like pools of tar against the whiteness of her face. She saw somethings in Johnny's eyes, something new. He was not the big, blundering, foolish man she had seen before. His eyes flashed between their reddened lids, flashed with hate and recklessness.

"Johnny!" Midge cried, her voice triumphant over fear and pain.

The three men were coming toward Johnny on the gallery. Bozeman gripped Midge's arm. They walked with a tired, wobbly deadliness on their high-heeled boots. They didn't see the change on Johnny's face. They saw only the stiffened half-nude body of the dead Grimes that Johnny held in his burly arms. The old gunman, walking behind Midge, had his gun wavering at her back.

Bozeman's jaw had a broken look. His

mouth was crimson-stained. His eyes resembled a pair of murderous black holes in a bloodied mask. The crazy kid, walking beside Midge, looked scared. His face was raw redness. The three six-guns were covering Johnny now. He came lurching down off the gallery, with flames spurt-ing in the kitchen behind him. He heaved the corpse to the ground in front of Boze-man. It rolled like a thrown-down log.

Bozeman brandished his forty-five at Johnny. He mumbled through his broken mouth, "Stand back, you loco—"

Johnny's eyes were pale slits. But his bloodstained and battered face was now as impassive as rock. The glow of the fire spread over the misty yard, and the fog was beginning to lift.

Johnny was watching Midge, not Boze-man, and she met his gaze, wonderingly, exultantly. Her lips shaped his name "Johnny!" but made no sound the others could hear.

And then it happened. Midge twisted around suddenly, clawing at the old gun-man's leathery, staring face. He sprang back, jerking his arms and elbows up to shield his eyes from raking fingernails. But Midge sank her teeth in his gun arm, and the weapon dropped to the ground.

Johnny jumped at the same moment. He hurled himself upon Bozeman first as the latter was thrown off guard by the commotion behind him. Johnny struck Bozeman a smashing blow in the throat that dropped him as though a ton weight had crushed him to earth. On the right, the surly kid let out a bleating yell and fired at Johnny as Johnny spun his way. The bullet sliced through Johnny's shirt, and he threw a fist at the kid and watched him sink in a crumpled heap.

Johnny veered at the oldtimer, who was still in difficulties with Midge, who was scratching at his face and stamping on his feet and screaming like a banshee. Johnny's fist reached past Midge and clouted the oldster on the temple. The man went

sprawling with arms and legs waving.

But the kid was on his feet again, gun rising. Johnny switched around and dove at him. The kid's gun stabbed fire again. A large, lazy blow caught Johnny under the left shoulder-blade and turned him half way around, quite painlessly because now Johnny was incapable of further punishment. He was numb to physical suffering; only his mind was working now. His legs gave away and he staggered sideways, caught himself. Then he fell. He struck hard, on his back, and his head bumped the mud, and breath went out of his lungs with a sudden gust.

And as he fell, he saw Midge fall too, but she fell on Bozeman's dropped revolver. It jerked up in both of her hands. He saw the weapon spit flame three times and Midge's wrists jerked with each shot.

All of the bullets whacked into the kid's chest with small spurts of dust that fanned out, and his coat jumped a little with each spurt. The kid came apart all at once. He was dead when he struck the ground.

Johnny was dimly aware of riders milling in the ranchyard. Stretched on his side now, very tired, he saw and heard Sheriff Cluff bringing his posse in around the barn at a gallop. He ignored them completely after that first glimpse. He had eyes only for Midge, who had dropped beside him and had cradled his head in her lap.

She was crying. Her tears cut white, zigzag streaks in the dirt and grime on her cheeks. She held his head and let the tears fall unchecked and he let her cry. They both watched the house burn. They'd built it together, plank by plank, board by board. It seemed to take a long time burning—a terribly long time. Meanwhile the sheriff and his men were bending over the motionless bodies of four men—Bozeman and his crew and Sam Grimes. Johnny didn't even notice when the bodies were carried away from the burning house.

Midge said, in a shaking voice, "Johnny, are you all right?"

"Yeah." He nodded his head in her lap. "Feel like I'd been sleepin' a powerful long time and jest woke up." He rested a moment, then said, wryly, "That saw-bones was crazier'n me. Said I'd never be right in the head again!"

Midge murmured, "Now maybe you'll be sorry you married me."

"Ain't sorry," he told her gently. "Plumb glad. We licked Bozeman—me and you!"

"You're hurt bad?"

"Naw. My head hurts me still, though. So's my side."

"You broke Bozeman's neck that last time. I'm glad."

"Me too."

The sheriff came up and suddenly the sun was shining. Cluff looked down at Johnny and pulled at his yellow mustache. He said finally, gravely, "We're takin' the bodies to town, Schutt. That old gunnie of Bozeman's done told me it was them that drygulched Grimes and then planted his body in your barn last night. Bozeman figured to git you hanged for murder and then grab your range a little at a time. I been watchin' him ever since him and you had that ruckus at the Casino. He was a bad 'un, hoof, hair and horns! Couldn't git nuthin' on him, though, till now. Say, Johnny, it looks like you been shot up some!"

"A crease," Johnny muttered. "I don't mind it. On'y my head keeps achin'."

"You lay here and I'll send the saw-bones back pronto," Cluff said. "Be back in an hour, now the fog's lifted. You can ride in when you're able and give evidence for the inquest." He turned to rejoin his men at the horses.

"Thank you," Midge called after him.

"Thank you very much!" Her voice trembled but grew steady when she said to Johnny, "Our house is burnt down. My new stove, too."

Johnny snuggled his head in her lap. "We'll build us another. And I'll dig out the stove and black 'er up as good as new. Midge, don't cry no more! There'll be no more trouble."

Her tears splashed down on Johnny's cheek, and she wrapped her skinny arms around him and held him as though she would never let him go. Smoke from the ruins of the house swirled in the sunlight. The fog had melted; blue sky was streaking through the overcast. At last Midge's sobbing stopped. She said, "We're alive, and you're whole again. Ain't never goin' to cry again as long as I live! Seems like I could even live in a tent and be satisfied!"

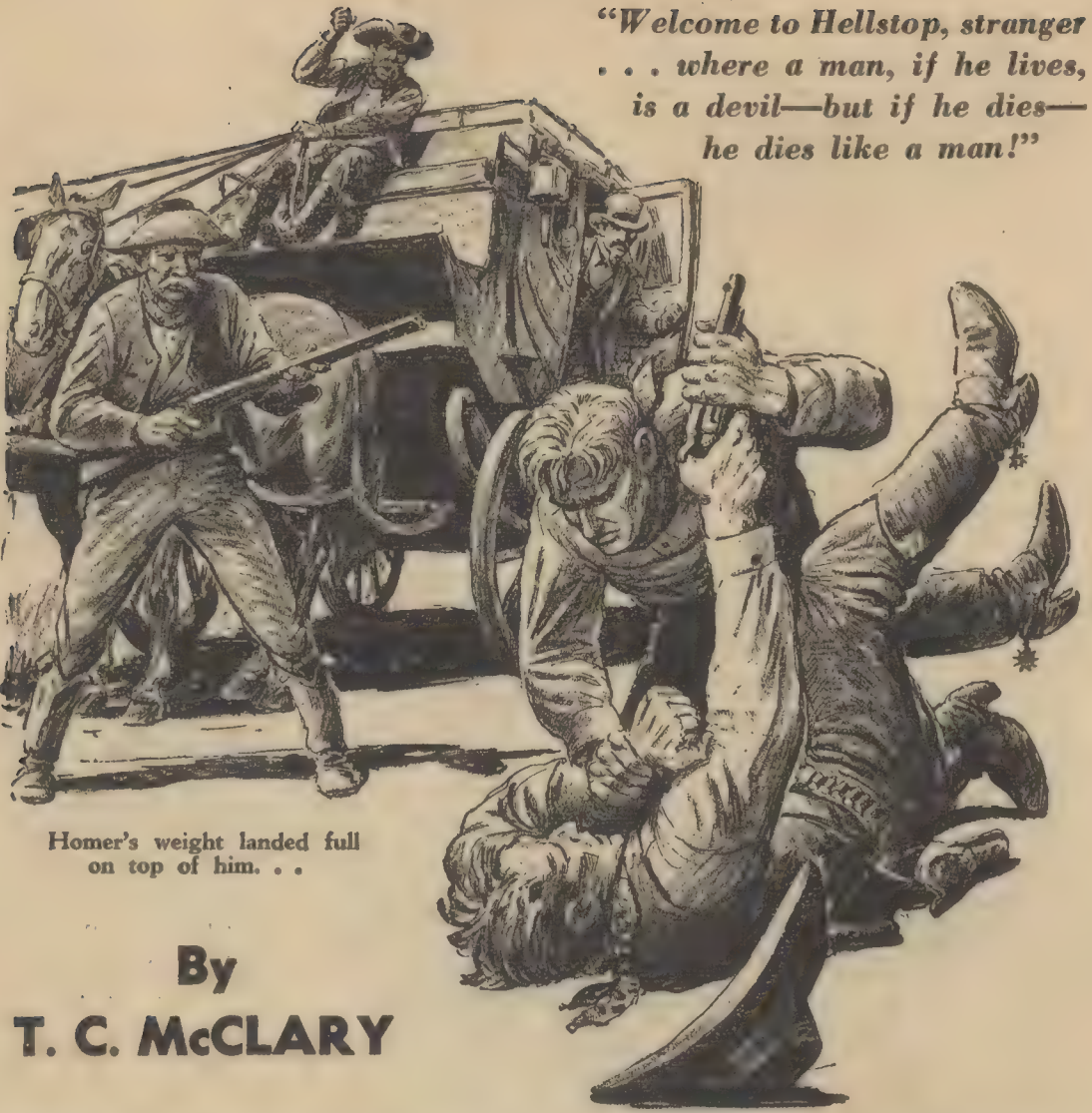
Johnny leaned harder against her. He felt weak, giddy, but he felt good, too. Her arms pressed him tighter. He liked it. He liked it fine. And his head didn't hurt him any more.

**BROKER
NO
JOKER**



EAST ST. LOUIS, Ill.—
"I mean it when I ask for Calvert," says Max Adelman, insurance broker of this city. "I switched to Calvert long ago, because I like its better taste. And with me it's the taste that counts."

*"Welcome to Hellstop, stranger
... where a man, if he lives,
is a devil—but if he dies—
he dies like a man!"*



Homer's weight landed full
on top of him. . .

By
T. C. McCLARY

Bigger Than a Six-Gun

WITH day's first break of gray and muddy yellow light, Homer Westphal ducked out of the log-and-sod building that was stageline station Lonely and sucked a deep lungful of burned out, listless airs that had not moved since sundown. A month's unrelieved heat lay its dead pressure on the flat, scorched land. But the hard strain dragging through his eyes had come since midnight. Now, smelling the lingering acrid scent of dust, he frowned, first left, then right, along the trail still wrapped in

shifting, fluid darkness. He cut no sign and pinned his attention hard upon the white blob of the shack forming out of the shadows opposite.

Old Badger Yokus, the stage agent, came out behind him yanking up a single gallus. "Next time you go out to investigate a midnight rider," he wheezed cantankerously, "use the back door and take along a six-gun."

"Don't think I'd know how to use one," the hostler grunted.

The sniff and stomp of the swing team

came from the nearby corrals, and Yokus allowed, "The outlaws don't hanker for them half wild stage ponies—" He broke off, followed Westphal's attentive look with a grunt, and added on a different tone, "Don't worry on Sue none. Those three holes in her door came from the inside, son."

Westphal moved awkwardly in his tracks and felt the heat blaze clean down into his corded neck. "It ain't that," he said self-consciously. "It's just that a woman shouldn't be living way out here alone that way."

"Sure shouldn't," Badger agreed.

Homer swung off through night's last shrinking shadows to water and feed the stock and clean the corral. He put meticulous attention upon himself after that, stripping his soaked shirt and scrubbing his angular, tough-knit body clean from the belt, and with the first flood of golden light, shaved his grave, homely face in the splotched piece of broken mirror.

He scowled at his reflection when he finished, thinking maybe he'd do better to grow a beard to hide his looks. He thought of the girl who ran the Eatery at this desolate swing stop, and felt the harsh tug of a man's raw moodiness when he considers himself unworthy of a woman's serious attentions.

He had in his mind the corrosive memory of another woman's scornful laughter and the acid of her contempt. "A comic Valentine," she'd called him.

Better to drift along, he thought, *than take that again*, and let his momentary flash of bitterness sink back into acceptance of the fact that he was just about as worthless as that other girl had told him.

His shirt was bone dry when he pulled it on again and he stopped at the corral to frisk the nosing ponies as he passed. The girl was watching from the deep shadows of her doorway as he crossed the trail's thick dust, a curious puzzle-moment flicking the containment of her high-

boned face. She asked as he approached, "Homer, when you can gentle down the orneriest half wild team in this division that way, why in pot don't you go to raising horseflesh?"

He touched his hat and stopped with one work-gnarled, muscular hand against a post. "Mebbe, mebbe I'm afraid of work, Miss Sue, or mebbe just afraid of worrying," he told her.

"Pshaw!" she sniffed. "Man who tends those horses the way you do ain't afraid of anything."

He shook his head. "No. Working for hire don't tie a man down the same; you can always quit and drift," he said.

He saw the irritation stream through her wide set slate gray eyes and there was a flash of disappointment in her that was personal. "Men!" she breathed. "You all ought to be born with a mallet to bang your own heads!"

"Womenfolk see middling well to that," he said and followed her inside.

Badger Yokus was lingering over second coffee, trying hard not to show the racking pains that ripped his chest. "Sue," he told the hostler conversationally, "says that rider crossed the whole flats at that same full tilt run, Homer."

The hostler frowned and grunted around his flapjacks, "Who'd ride a horse that way in this weather, 'cept mebbe Whitey Teague?"

"If I figured it was Whitey, I'd quick forget it," Badger advised grimly. "You're new out here, but you've seen enough for that. Whitey lords this trail, and he don't like folks curious about him."

The girl stopped in the doorway but did not turn her head. "Is Whitey really bad or just full of hot temper, Badger?" she asked.

"I ain't ever given my opinion and I ain't dead yet," the agent noted. "That's more than some in boothill could say if they could holler."

Homer Westphal shook his head. "I can't see the rightness of shooting a man dead," he said.

"Well, most often it's your murder or his," Yokus chuckled.

Yokus went into another coughing spell and Westphal helped him over to the station. Coming back out, he heard the dust-muffled sound of a horse to the west and watched a plume of dust advance behind a ridge. Shortly, a man on a paint pony came out against the morning's thickening yellow glare, approaching from an angle that gave him a full sweep of all the buildings and corrals. At twenty yards he checked his pony and walked it in, a man with an arrogant, sharp face.

"Whitey Teague," Westphal noted to himself and stood with his hands gripping his thighs loosely while the outlaw came on in.

Whitey drew rein and sat for a space absolutely motionless, as if he would actually hear trouble if it were hiding, or smell it out with some sixth sense. "Where's Yokus?" he grunted, his hard, colorless gaze on the hostler.

Homer bent his head toward the swing station. "Down with the cough. He's ailing."

A hacking cough broke out from the building and the outlaw listened, keening the sounds for some false note and finally accepting the statement with a scant drop of his head. He studied the corral, studied hoofprints in the dust, then studied Homer with suspicion.

"Who's been here since last sundown?" he demanded.

Westphal made a horizontal motion with his hand. "Nobody," he said.

"No night riders?" Whitey asked.

Westphal darkened. "One came through, but he didn't stop. Riding like hell."

Whitey Teague's tight mouth touched with humor and he swung his attention to the girl who'd come out on her stoop.

"Must have had the devil chasing him to ride past you, Sue," he chuckled.

Her eyes muddled and her chin lifted at the boldness of his stare. It was clear that the danger of the man attracted her even as it repelled her.

Whitey laughed and arched his chest in pure vanity and swung down. He said offhand to Homer, "Queenie needs water when she's cooled."

The tender swung his attention to the animal and muttered, "She'll be cool enough to drink by the time you've eaten."

THE outlaw swung and stiffened and put a diamond hard look drilling at him. There was affront in the pinch of his nostrils and gray anger streaked around his mouth.

The girl straightened where she stood, stretching a little so that her dress pulled tightly against her vital body. "Whitey," she allowed, "you want a drink yourself before you eat. Get it across the way now. I'll have your breakfast in five minutes."

He said, "That's my gal talking!" and hitched at his belts. He gave Homer another hard look as he spur-dragged by to get his drink from Yokus. Homer stood just where he was, still staring at the horse, but not seeing it, not seeing anything at all except the expression of merciless, overweening pride that had been in Whitey Teague's bleak white eyes. It was incredible to him that such men actually existed, but he knew that Whitey Teague would kill as quickly as a rattlesnake, and for about the same reason; simply that somebody had aroused him or disturbed him sunning his pride.

The girl's voice came at him with command, "Homer, come here this instant!"

He moved through the deep, stagnant shadows to the kitchen where she turned, pale of face, and said, "Homer, ain't you got any sense at all, crossing Whitey like that, and in front of a woman?"

Homer growled, "I'm no chore boy."

"You're like to be buzzard bait you go trying that again!" she warned him. Then she caught the slight this was upon his manhood, his burning humiliation, and she let him see her gentle understanding and heartfelt liking. "I need a reliable man around here," she half joked him. "Don't go getting shot up on me, friend!"

He forced an unfelt smile and moved out with his head bowed. He moved across the trail's thick, fine-powdered dust and found work repairing a harness on the corral, thus being out of Sue's way, but within earshot if her voice was raised. The futility of this crossed his mind with acid irony as he considered his absolute uselessness against a man like Whitey.

Whitey came out of the station and moved toward him, the chill vindictiveness of his gaze drilling at Homer's shoulder-blades. He said grittily, "Hostler, you're new in this country."

Homer stopped work and turned. "I've got some things to learn," he admitted.

"You better learn faster or the worms will be teaching you!" the outlaw snapped.

Whitey let his ruthless gaze linger a moment then snorted with contempt and moved across to Sue's Eats. Homer stood there with sullen shame burning through him.

He saw the flick of the girl's movements going to and fro through the shadows; occasionally, he caught the guarded excitement of her laughter.

There was a long silence and he fumbled at his work; he grew nervous, he grew taut. The sudden, easy call of his name from her doorway twanged through him like a bowstring. "Second coffee now if you want it, Homer," she sang out. "I want to make up a fresh pot for the stage."

He wigwagged and went and scrubbed his hands. He never failed to do that; it was like an instinct. He stood in the doorway adjusting his vision to the shadows, and Whitey's drawling insolence came at

him like a whiplash, "Danged if he don't look like a rock lizard blinking at the sunlight!"

The girl called half humorously from the kitchen, "You leave Homer be. He does more good around here than all you hellborn boys."

"What else could he do?" Whitey chuckled. He swung his attention as the girl came back in with warmed up java. He said, "Sue, you wouldn't be a bad looking woman decked out in some glad clothes."

"Where would I get 'em with what I make here?" she asked. It was the wrong thing to say.

"You ain't doing bad," Whitey muttered and fished out a poke that chunked with gold weight when he tossed it on the table. He disregarded Homer; he didn't even bother to flick him with contempt. He watched the girl steadily and saw her flush and saw her pale, and by the sheer power of his bold recklessness, drew her eyes back to him.

"I'll do better than that," he said, and suddenly laughed at some unspoken humor. "I'll bring you something classy to doll up in and take you stepping where you can flash your sparkle."

The girl's eyes flicked at Homer and then she dropped her head, but slanted it sidewise immediately and half lifted one hand with a listening gesture. Whitey looked puzzled and tipped his chair carefully forward from the wall, never losing his keen balance, nor the precise hang of his gun.

Homer said, "Stage coming over the ridge."

Whitey's eyes sharpened on the girl, and his cruel mouth broke into a vain smile. "Sharp," he grunted at her. "Sharper than hell. Sue, I been missing things in you."

For the barest space, his eyes went narrow, his mouth went thin. Then he was on his feet, arching his chest and smiling with

the arrogance of his kind. "Mebbe I'll see you soon," he said, and moved outside.

Homer heard him stop on the stoop to catch his vision, stop in the dust to look eastward, and then drift his horse across to the trough. He looked at the girl with a mixture of worry and shame, knowing she had not wanted Whitey's money, but could not affront his vindictive pride by refusing. With it came the bitter thought that nothing he could do would help her, and that even if he wanted, she had given him no right to try.

She picked up the poke and stood looking at it with a dark smile, then expelled a breath of irony and put the poke into a box upon a shelf. She looked at Homer with eyes that were nearly black but with gray shafts of light slashing through them as winter light pierces storm clouds.

"More extra money," she said, "than all I've made in three years here!"

Whitey's trail call knifed in from outside and his hoofbeats drummed off into the glaring wall of heat. Homer got to his feet and stared at the floor moodily, feeling some force or maybe weakness in the girl reaching out to him, and finally asking, "Anything I can do for you, Miss Sue?"

She said almost desperately, "Yes!" and those gray lights splintered from her eyes before the solid blackness of her thoughts closed in. "Homer, take me over to the fandango at Frying Pan tonight. Or is that too bold for me to ask?"

"Too bold?" he echoed and his head snapped up. "Why, Miss Sue, I'd have asked you long ago, but I never figured you'd favor me."

Gentleness touched her; it was in the quick, impulsive reach of her hand. "Don't think so humbly of yourself, Homer. It's not good for a man."

Homer smiled.

The stage driver's blasting call sailed over the explosion of his whip, the special call announcing he carried superintendent

Dobson. Homer said, "Gawdamighty!" and moved out in a hurry, barely getting the harness down when the stage came smoking in.

Yokus had hobbled out to open the door with a flourish and Cyclop Charley, the fierce one-eyed driver, swarmed over the side to allow without belittling modesty, "Right smack on the second, Mr. Dobson."

DOBSON got down fanning off the trail powder and told him drily, "It ain't your timing the customers complain about. It has something to do with shaking up and risk of life and limb, if you know what that means."

"Must of been those bad springs on stage six," Cyclop Charley muttered.

Dobson looked at the girl standing in the doorway, his austere expression breaking with a smile that looked out of place on him. "Never too early, never too late, eh, Sue?" he said easily.

"Not if you've got your quarter," she told him. "I play no favorites."

"Make it a half for eggs and fries and steak," he grunted. "I might as well eat before this danged one-eyed tornado kills me."

He pivoted on one heel and put his shrewd, calculating attention on Homer, who was leading off the sweat-soaked team. Dobson said to Homer acidly, "You figure you can harness up six hell-critters after a stage gets in and get it out on time again, mister?"

The hostler turned beet red beneath his charcoal burn. He said self-consciously, "I didn't know I'd ever slowed the stage up, Mr. Dobson."

"It's damned funny if you don't," Dobson grunted. "There ain't a hostler on my line does a six horse harness and hitch in under twenty minutes—"

Yokus said carefully, "He don't have much trouble with 'em, Harry. He's done gentled most of 'em in their swing-waits here."

"Sp'iling good wild hossflesh!" Cyclop Charley spit with disgust.

"Why you damned sputtering gilamonster," Yokus challenged. "You've bettered your time by twelve minutes in rough weather since he come here!"

"Ha!" Dobson gusted through his teeth.

Cyclop Charley shot Yokus a baleful look but reddened. "Well, they do pull smoother when they're gentled," he admitted.

Dobson waved the discussion aside and studied the hostler. "So you're the one's been teaching 'em fancy manners, eh?" he grunted.

"I been doing wrong?" Homer asked on a dry, tight note. "I'll quit if you say so, Mr. Dobson."

"When I say so, I'll fire you!" the super corrected with a bark. He scowled at Homer and then spun like a top and moved inside the Eats with his fast, energetic step.

Yokus followed him in and asked, "What news up-line, Harry?"

Dobson's eyes darted to each of the five passengers and speared them separately. "Shooting and robbery at Laverne's mill last night," he grunted.

The girl set his plate down with a hard sound and caught her breath. "Anyone hurt?" she asked.

"Laverne is dead."

"Poor Laverne," she murmured.

Dobson nodded, "Exactly what I said. It ain't good for business either." He snapped his attention at the agent. "Who was that rode out as we pulled in."

"Whitey Teague," Yokus said.

"Look all in?" the super demanded.

"No, can't say he did," Yokus grunted. "Pony was fresh."

"Always is when they show up to strut their glory and drift their warning," Dobson growled. "Whitey just started reckless, but he's getting mighty arrogant."

The girl looked at the box where the

gold was cached. "If you know men are dangerous, why don't you do something about them?" she asked somberly.

Dobson scowled and rasped, "Mebbe that's just why, Sue, to put it flat."

He looked at his watch, bolted the rest of his steak and washed it down with coffee. "We'll see how late that hostler is now," he grunted. He put his money on the table and moved out with his short, tapping step.

He stopped to scowl, watching Cyclop Charley hit the box and take the reins in one movement, and put his challenging bawl blasting through the heat, "Load up for heaven, gents; you've got the super-intendent riding this time!"

Dobson glared at the driver and dove in, grunting across his shoulder at Yokus about Homer, "Good man at his job. Too bad he ain't got the gumption that goes with it."

The last passenger scurried out and Yokus slammed the door. Cyclop Charley slammed off the brake and let out a yip and filled the air with the explosion of his whip. The two men stood there watching the string of dust rushing off into the shimmering yellow glare and Homer said somberly, "Don't sound like Dobson thinks much of me."

"He don't like or unlike anything except how it hits business," Yokus told him.

The hostler walked the ponies cool and watered them. He looked at their hoofs and curried them, but his motions were automatic, it didn't seem like anything he was or did was right since that first woman made him see himself as useless.

He looked off westward into the drifting sea of midday heat, telling himself for the second time that day, *Better to drift than stick and stew in your own shame.*

The shebang over at Frying Pan would be a kind of exit party, a bright spot finishing what would otherwise sour into black defeat and bitterness.

Day's heat pressed down upon the scorching plain, throttling, oppressive, writhing like something filled with hate. They skipped midle meal in this weather and he went off to take a *siesta* near the ponies. The light was changing and the shimmering throb had left the wall of glare when he came awake. It was a longer sleep than usual and something had aroused him. Now he found it—Sue was calling his name.

He doused the heat thickness out of his head and crossed to her shack to fetch her water and wood so that she could make ready for the evening stage, and was rewarded with cool ginger beer and pie. She went at her work with a light step, humming for all the heat, and occasionally he caught deviltry dancing in her wide gray eyes.

He reflected that a girl like this had no business out here roughing it and earning her own living. She could have anything and almost any man she wanted, and she was entitled to the best home a man could give. But she was stubborn and it was a subject she did not like being chided on.

"We'll take picnic supper and breakfast," she told him, "and camp along the way."

"Sundown and sunup," he nodded, catching some of her excitement. "We can make Lover's Leap for the first, and catch sunup from Red Mesa if we come back the other way."

She paused to look at him with quizzical concentration. "You had that figured fast, Homer," she noted on a gentle, almost husky note.

He stained clean out to his pried-out ears and scalded with humiliation because he could feel them wiggle. "Well," he admitted, "I figured some on what you'd like when you get away from this hot kitchen."

She cut sandwiches and pie and readied coffee for the stage, and then some movement carried her attention out into the softening evening light. She leaned to peer

from the back window and he saw the tightness hit her shoulderblades, and when she turned her face held a still, graven quality. She said, "It's Whitey Teague again," and for that space, her eyes held that torn cold gray of winter storm clouds.

HE LICKED his lips and turned grave with the things she did not need to say, and he looked at her and found her eyes steady upon him, dark and questing, and then he looked away.

Whitey came through the front door, pausing to scan the house ahead of him, spur-dragging, arrogant, moving as if he owned the place. He stopped in the kitchen door and knuckled back his hat, a man with restless recklessness keyed up through him. He dropped a bundle to the floor and said to the girl, "There your glad rags. Purty up and we'll put some cuckoo clocks and fireworks into that fandango over to Frying Pan."

Her mouth formed a broad oval; she made a fluttered gesture of her hands. She darted Homer a look that swept to Whitey, and back to Homer and then to Whitey again. "I didn't figure you'd be coming back today, Whitey," she murmured. "I told Homer I'd go with him."

Whitey shot the hostler a stare of amazement so derisive it did not hold a grain of jealousy. "Him?" he asked, and suddenly shook the rafters with his deep laugh. "Lordamighty, you are a slick one, Sue, showing your contempt for all the hotblooded men who've asked you!"

Homer leaned back against the wall, face locked, gray edging his jaws, but eyes steady and trying hard not to show his hurt to the girl. He said, "You didn't figure on this, I guess. Don't give me a second thought, Miss Sue."

He could actually feel the whirl of her thoughts, some secret thing she wanted to say, probably to soften Whitey's high-riding arrogance. But she was like a squirrel caught and running in a cage,

with no escape from this awful setup.

Whitey Teague was beginning to stiffen, to study the girl with hard attention. He jerked his head sidewise at the hostler without bothering to look at him. He said, "You can go along now, fella," as if he were talking to a gawking kid who had overstayed after a piece of pie from a woman's hand.

The girl's eyes sharpened. She said flintily, "I'll make my own wants known in my own house, Whitey!"

The outlaw shrugged and grinned and built a smoke.

The girl crossed to the hostler. She said, deep and honestly straightforward, "Homer, I didn't do this on purpose."

Homer beat the depressed spirit from his face. He managed his homely smile. "Whatever you figure is what I want for you to do, Miss Sue," he muttered.

She stared at him a moment; he saw some wild hope in her start to rise, then break and subside. The hard, dark gray was in her eyes again. "I'd best go with Whitey," she murmured. "I'll make up for it another time, Homer."

He said sincerely, "You more than did already," and dragged his gaze from her, and swung out into the lifting heat of evening.

He felt numbed, and almost tripped off the stoop and lurched to the wall and leaned back against it breathing hard. He heard sharp words start, the girl defending

him against Whitey's coarse-grained, thickskinned humor, and he caught the change in Whitey's voice from humor to puzzlement, and finally through his weak daze he heard Whitey grunt, "Well what in hell did you mean to go with that mongrel for if it wasn't a joke?"

"Because I like him," Sue answered stonily. Then her voice took on a pitch and she added fiercely. "Because he's the only honest, decent man I've met who doesn't always smell of guns or cattle!"

"Lordamighty," Whitey muttered. "You rating men by their perfume now? What good would he be to a woman except for chopping wood? He don't even tote a gun, let alone have the guts to use it!"

"That's why I'm going with you," she answered shortly. "If you could do what you did to Laverne, Lord knows what you'd do to a man you wouldn't shoot!"

Homer's head jerked up, his powerful hands spread and pressed against the wall.

Those were words; the impact of the idea had momentarily stripped him of ability to catch the feelings. But something was churning inside of him that had not churned since that other woman.

Vaguely, he was conscious of dust smoke boiling over the wall of receding haze westward, and of Yokus hobbling around the corner of the station and calling waspishly, "Stage coming in! You heat dazed?"



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JAYNE'S P-W for **PIN-WORMS**
(TRADE MARK)

"To hell with the stage!" Homer muttered to himself, and felt power suddenly bolt through him. He felt bigger than he'd ever felt in his life. He felt it and he looked it and through the drifting-yellow heat, Yokus noted it and muttered, "I'll be damned!" and suddenly grinned.

He looked big enough to fill the doorway when he stood there and called in, "Sue, I'm Injuning. I don't figure I want to give up my claim."

She was in her room dressing but she heard him and he caught the two opposite things in the intake of her breath—fear, and a thundering rise of her respect for him.

Whitey was tilted back in a chair against the wall and stared at him with disbelief. He said, "You drunk or heat cracked? I don't want to mess up Sue's temper by killing her pet poodle."

Homer's eyes bored at him. He made a bare movement of his homely face toward his empty hip. "I was figuring a real man's settlement," he growled. "Anyone can shoot a gun who gets it in his fist first."

Whitey tipped his chair down. "Why you loco saddlebum," he bit out. "I'd rip you to ribbons anyway you asked, but I ain't dirtying my fists on a common hostler today!"

"Then you sure ain't taking Miss Sue to the fandango," Homer told him on a tight note, but new, and coming strange to his own ears, his own voice held taunting contempt.

Whitey came out of his seat then like a puma, clawing his gun and clubbing it. "Why, I'll give you a whipping that you'll damned well remember, mister!" he grated.

Homer stepped backward across the stoop and out into the dust. His neck was stiff at the other's ready violence, his heart hammering, but his lips pulled back hard against his teeth in a savage grin. Whitey followed out to the edge of the stoop and

stopped for a space to fire up his temper.

He stood there cursing and then he came out on balanced toes, his gun wicked as a whip. Homer felt the tight lines pull up across his top lip and the anticipation knot his stomach, but feelings leashed in him for ten long years had come unpent and now he forced himself to grit, "This is going to be a great feather for yore glory, Whitey—that you didn't have the guts to fight with fists!"

Badger Yokus' voice twanged out from the corner of the station, "Whitey, you go gunning an unarmed stageline man on stageline property, and you're going to have something tougher to meet than just a hostler! Throw down your gun if you aim to fight, or boot it and ride out proper!"

Whitey's head snapped sidewise, then further to where the stage was stringing its fierce boil of dust along the trail, then back to the knarled but sharp-eyed agent. His face was taut and white with affront at the dirty trick of fate in bringing witnesses in on this. "This your fight or mine?" he ripped out at Badger. "Your man asked for trouble, and I'll give him what he asked for. He's lucky it ain't lead!"

PREACHER DALY, on the incoming stage's ribbons, let out his blood-curdling trail whoop as he passed the ridge, and cutting sign on some trouble at the station, bore down with his whip exploding like a fanning six-gun. Whitey was cursing now, turning the blast of his language mostly on Homer. Whitey was a wanted man, safe enough in this country ordinarily, but still with dodgers and enemies waiting for him, and filled with a wanted man's caution as well as arrogance. Even had he wished, which he didn't, he would not dare put off his gun, even for an instant.

"And damn you good, you knew that when you walked into this!" he barked at

Homer. "Boy, I think you figured a pretty fourflush here, figuring there'd be no fight, but it would set you off in front of a hashlinger you're stuck on!"

Homer said on a dry, stubborn note, "They named you right, Whitey. They named the color of your liver."

The outlaw's mouth jerked into a barbed wire line and his eyes turned to molten slits. Fury was acting on him, blazing through his sense of caution. But the stage was coming, and the stageline already had a score to settle against him, given an excuse, and now, for this instant of indecision, he was held between murderous anger and consideration of his chances to dodge retribution.

Homer saw the indecision. Suddenly, fists clenched, he found himself moving forward, teeth locked, step slow and heavy, but impelled forward by a savage instinct. He was walking into murder, and he knew it; he was walking into a man of trained violence, probably a better fighter in any way at all, but nothing in the world short of a bullet would have stopped him.

Whitey gave a blasting breath of contempt, but he was backing up ahead of Homer, and a single line of sweat put big, glistening beads across his brow. He was being crowded and this big, two-footed ox was going to make him kill.

He still held the gun clubbed in his palm, but now his fingers began to inch it into firing position. "All right," he ground out, but Homer had come unsprung like a slipped spring and his rock-hard fist slammed blood into the last part of the word, staggering Whitey back to twist and come up like a striking snake, raw pride setting his decision to kill this man.

His gun arm swung, but Homer was a man acting on sheer instinct now, and those instincts had been worked up, by the wild, killing bunch of horses in that land. He had learned to move fast away from flying hoofs, and he had learned how to

block, and now his knee came up like a mule's kick, cracking Whitey's wrist, throwing a wild shot as the gun flew out of the outlaw's numbed hand.

"Now!" Homer rasped through set teeth and felt a primitive and bloody exultation surge up through him. "Now, Whitey boy!" His mouth pulled out in a wicked grin and he came swarming at the outlaw.

He didn't know many tricks and the outlaw did, but they tore up a cloud of enveloping dust. There was blood, but most of the blood was Homer's. The fight was a ruthless, roaring fire in him now, and nothing short of death would stop him.

Whitey ripped free for a space to clear his eyes of dirt and blood and draw a few sawing breaths, and made out Homer coming in for more, a pulpy, battered hulk, licked half insensible right then, but still driving in for the kill. He saw that in Homer, and knew that he was half beaten himself, the violence of the conflict was draining the strength out of him. He knew there'd be no way of stopping Homer with fists, and at the same instant the gun flicked into the corner of his vision.

A burst of brutal contempt ripped from his lungs and his boot drove out, smashing Homer back like a log ram. Whitey twisted in the movement, he threw himself sidewise clawing for that gun. He had the bloody hostler placed in his mind, and a wicked smile of victory tore at his mouth as he spun on his belly like a silver dollar, gun cocked, and reaching the point of fire, blasting.

He heard the bark of the gun, and Badger Yokus outraged yell, and the slamming brake of the incoming stage in the same instant. Those three things were clear, and also the fact that the hostler wasn't where he'd shot at, and then Homer's full weight landed atop of him like a berserk bull.

Homer had never used the trick in his

life, and maybe it was instinct, or maybe accident, but he came down with both knees striking Whitey's kidneys like nails driving into a board. The outlaw's whole body arched like a bow, and he gave a terrible yell as the breath exploded out of him, and then he flattened and clawed for wind.

The hostler staggered off the man and whipped the gun out of his hand and threw it, and stood back waiting for him to get up and fight again. Whitey caught wind, but he took one solitary knowing look of the blazing fight that still filled the hostler. He took the look and felt the emptiness of his hand, and he gave a croaking, bawling yell, "My back's broke!" and scrambled to his feet and hit leather in a leap and spurred his pony wildly out through the shrouding dust which the stage had left hanging.

The passengers watched him depart in contemptuous silence, and then Dobson, who had switched and returned on the Eastbound stage, snorted, "Back broke, eh? Did you see him take that saddle runnin'?"

"Turned yella when he lost his gun and saw he was in for hurting," Preacher Daly spit. His eyes held scorn, and he reached back in memory and added, "I recollect now when he turned to a gunslick. It was to even up the score of a boy who'd beaten him squarely."

Dobson gave a snort of scorn. "Well, this is one score he won't come back to even! He had his gun in hand agin an unarmed man, and had it taken away and was whipped and drove off with his tail dragging in spite of it! When the wild bunch hear that, they'll haze him out of the country."

Badger Yokus hobbled forward as if this were his personal victory. "My boy!" he crowed at the superintendent. "I hired him and I've done made him what he is, Harry Dobson!"

The superintendent made a quarter turn

on one heel and scowled at the agent. "Well, what he is is fired," he barked. "I ain't having hostlers brawling when the stage is due in!"

Then his gaze traveled on and he saw the girl standing in the doorway, her face dead white, but color returning, both sick with fear and brimming with gladness. Dobson touched his hat, he was like that, and his growly expression eased. "Well, don't worry on the big galoot too much, Sue," he grunted. "I might fix him up with another job. Like superintendent of ponies."

Then Dobson turned and gave one of his rare and not-quite-right-looking grins at Homer. "What do you say to that, hostler?"

"I say take it back and jump on it," Homer scowled, the raw edge of fight not yet soaked up in him, and he turned to look at the girl himself, and found there all of the things he never would have dared to dream again. "But that don't mean I'm too proud to do business with the stage-line," he added, the wild temper washing out of him suddenly.

Then he turned back to Dobson and gave an awkward, forthright grin. "It's just I figure a job ain't big enough to hold a married man, and I'll have to go into hoss raising if I want to do right by a family."

"Hah!" the superintendent roared and glared, and glared his stormiest. "Just a damned sneak who worked for us to learn all the tricks, eh? Well, young fella, let me tell you this—you've grown mighty big in half a day, but you aint' so big you can buck this stageline."

"Ain't I?" Homer growled back, hackles coming up in a hurry.

"No, you ain't!" Dobson barked at him. "This line gets first call on all your broke and trained ponies. And I don't reckon that's going to leave many for anybody else figuring they're goin' to better us on hossflesh!"



COWBOYS FOREVER!

By S. OMAR BARKER

RIDE high the mesa, ride low the plain,
Tall in the saddle, with sure bridle rein,
Lean to the wind as it combs out the
grass,

Let there be jingling of spurs as you pass.
Ride swift the prairie, ride slow the hill,
Ride as a free man who knows his own will!
Let there be moonrise or starlight or sun,
Turn never back from a riding begun!
Ride the red river, ride the gray sand,
Ride where the cow tracks still dimple the land.

Hired-men-on-horseback, with leather for throne,
Ride the proud trails of a world all your own!

DEAD MAN'S JOURNEY

By LES SAVAGE, Jr.

As they rode away, Bandelier's shot caught Chileno and pushed him back against the wall. . . .



With a killing behind him—another ahead—he chose his last grim trail . . . a trail only the quick might travel out—and only the dead ride back!



CHAPTER ONE

Dead Man's Town

RAY BANDELIER fought his way by the fringe of the crowd in front of Sacramento's Lyceum theater and ducked down the alley. He got as far as the stage door, then sagged against the wall, drained by the exhaustion of his run.

Behind him he could hear the hubbub typical of Sacramento in the spring of 1859—the creak and rattle of buggies fighting their way through the swarms of miners and gamblers and emigrants in the streets, the cries of the men at the sidewalk thimble and strap games, the spiel of shills in front of the saloons. As Bander-

lier tried vainly to recognize sounds of pursuit in this, the stage door was flung open, and a kettle-bellied man in a black frock coat stepped out, laden with bundles and suitcases.

Bandelier tried to turn back toward the street, but his legs were rubber, and he fell against the wall. He would have gone down if the other had not dropped his load and lunged forward to catch him. Bandelier had a glimpse of a florid face under a bell-crowned hat and a sweeping mane of inky-black hair distinguished by the iron-grey at its temples. The eyes had a dramatic, burning quality, despite the red-rimmed, bloodshot look of a heavy drinker.

"When the wine's in, the wit's out, young man. Did they swindle you in that den of iniquity next door and then bounce you out?" His eyes narrowed, and he peered closer. "Or maybe it's something else—Mr. Bandelier."

Bandelier could not help stiffening against the wall in surprise. He made a tall figure, even bent over as he was. There once might have been a keen refinement to his face, with its long jaw, its high intelligent brow. But now the three-day growth of black beard and the starved look hollowing his cheeks gave him a frayed, beaten look.

"You're mistaken," he said, trying to get loose. "I got in here by accident."

"Accident, hell," snorted the other. "I heard about the murder today. They say you killed Henry Jordan in his office. They've been turning the town upside down for you—" he emitted a rueful snort—"It's funny. When I heard the man who killed Jordan was Ray Bandelier, I never connected it with the Bandelier who acted the best Hamlet outside of Booth, at Wallack's two years ago."

Bandelier straightened up, a strange, tense look crossing his face. "You saw me?"

"More than once," answered the man. "You've changed a lot. I guess I wouldn't have recognized you if I hadn't connected the names." He studied Bandelier's face carefully. "Did you really kill Jordan?"

A sullen defiance lit Bandelier's eyes. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

The man squeezed his arm. "Try me, son, try old Louis Calvert. We troupers have to stick together."

Bandelier brushed shaggy hair off his brow, a plea filtering into his face. "All right. I didn't kill Jordan. I've been prospecting out here a couple of years and found something good up on the Yuba. Jordan grubstaked me till he found I had pay dirt. I came down today to get enough money to finish developing the

mine. Jordan had the money there, but said he wouldn't give it to me till I signed a contract. It didn't take a lawyer to see that contract would have pinched me down to nothing. I—" Bandelier shook his head—"I guess I got pretty mad. We fought. I knocked him over the desk. But he was only unconscious when I left. I swear that, Calvert. He wasn't dead."

Louis Calvert frowned, shaking his head. "You picked a bad man to tangle with, son. Jordan was quite a beloved man—"

"Beloved, hell. He was a robber."

"He hid it well," Calvert said. "This very theater was founded by him. Half the men in town were his friends. I understand he and Sheriff McConnel came out from the East together." The older man shook his head. "No matter. I can't throw you to the dogs."

"I've tried every way out of town," Bandelier said. "They've got the roads blocked and the river watched."

A devilish amusement lit Calvert's eyes suddenly. "You been in California two years, you say? Speak any Mexican?"

"Quite a bit. I worked with some Mexican miners."

"The Calvert Players are leaving for Downleville tonight on the stage," said Calvert. "Our second lead got the gold fever in 'Frisco last week and jumped the company. What do you think the good Sheriff McConnel would say if we went through his road block with a new actor in our troop named—ah—Montoyo Gonzales?"

For a moment, Bandelier stared suspiciously at him. Then he could not help the grin that spread across his face, the first humor he had felt in days.

"Señor," he said. "You have just hired a new second lead."

Inside, the stagehands were still striking the sets, and Calvert led Bandelier through the hustle to his dressing room. He gave Bandelier his razor, and while

the younger man shaved himself, Calvert unlocked the wardrobe trunk. He pulled forth a pair of Mexican *charro* pants made of red suede with gold frogs sewed down the seam.

"We used these in *Knights of old Madrid*," he said. "Here's a bullfighter's hat. I guess it'll look enough like the lids these *Californios* wear to pass muster. Now for some spirit gum, and a mustache—"

A knock at the door cut him off, and a feminine voice called, "Are you decent, Uncle?"

Before Calvert could answer, the portal was pushed open, and the girl stepped inside. Tall, slim, deliciously curved, she stood with all the unconscious poise of a trained actress. Bandelier must have seen tons of gold during his years in California. It could not match the color of her hair, clustered into a shimmering mass of curls beneath the brim of her poke bonnet. Against the clear pallor of her skin, her great blue eyes were startling. She stared blankly at him a moment, and then he saw the change harden her face.

"Uncle—" she threw her hand at Bandelier—"this—"

"Is Raymond Bandelier, the famous Raymond Bandelier, of Wallack's, New York, my dear. *Hamlet* and the *Merchant of Venice*—"

"And the murderer of Henry Jordan in Sacramento," she finished, hotly.

Calvert stepped forward, catching her hand placatingly. "Now, Persia, my dear—"

"What are you doing, Uncle Louis?" she asked, pulling away. "Surely you aren't—you can't—"

"We are!" thundered Calvert, in an imperious voice. "He says he didn't do it. I'm giving him the benefit of the doubt. We can't throw a fellow trouper to the dogs."

A faint thread of contempt rode Persia's voice. "A fellow trouper?"

Bandelier realized he was still holding

the razor up, and lowered it. "What do you mean by that?"

"I saw you do *Hamlet* too, Mr. Bandelier," she said thinly. "Uncle Louis dragged me to it three times. I can't understand why they didn't stop booking you long before they did. You hardly moved your hands. Your face might as well have been carved from wood."

"You look intelligent," Bandelier told her sharply. "I should think you'd realize that mugging and gesturing are going out. It's high time we stopped waving at the gallery with every line. The time will come when your type of acting will make *Hamlet* look like comedy."

Calvert groaned. "You two really run true to form, don't you? The whole town is after this boy and you take time out to discuss technique."

PERSIA tossed her head. "I don't care, Uncle Louis. Bad actor or good, this man's still a murderer, and I won't let you help him escape."

"And what if he wasn't?" Calvert threw out his hand in a dramatic gesture. "What if they hanged him, and we found out afterward they had made a mistake. Could you ever face yourself in a mirror, Persia? Could you throw him to the dogs while there's still a doubt?"

She tried to hide the break in her anger. "He'll never be able to put up a good enough act to get by that sheriff."

"At least give him the chance to try. He's going to be our new second lead. Señor Montoyo Gonzales, from Mexico City."

She almost laughed. "You couldn't have picked a worse part. Mexicans are grandiloquent, you know. They gesture and declaim. With Bandelier's passion for underplaying, he'll have Sheriff McConnell tearing off that fake mustache in a minute."

For the first time, Calvert's voice was quiet. "We're already accomplices, you

know, Persia. We've already helped him."

She stared at him a moment. "You fool!" she said, hotly, and wheeled to walk out.

Calvert stared after the slammed door, then shook his head. "I'm afraid your disguise isn't the only thing we have to worry about, m'boy."

Bandelier met the actors before they walked the block to the stage station. There was the buxom, kindly character woman, and Sam Dent, the comedian. The ingenue was a shrew-faced, washed-out blonde, and the leading man was a tall, supercilious-looking young man named Herbert Kendall. They expressed surprise that Calvert should choose a Mexican, but he smoothed it over with his thunderous dramatics and herded them out.

It was a tight squeeze to get the whole troupe into the coach, and Bandelier found himself wedged in between Persia and her uncle on the back seat. There was still an angry, sullen look to Persia's narrowed eyes as they rolled out past the Union office, its oil lamps still going as the paper went to press. Then they were rattling through the hay-filled city market, and into the outskirts of town. And with every lurch of the coach, Bandelier found the tension in him mounting. He did not know exactly where the road would be blockaded, but it should be soon.

Then there was a shout from ahead, and a lantern swinging its saffron glow back and forth in the darkness. Thoroughbraces shrieked as the driver drew the coach to a halt. There was some talk outside, and then the door was swung open, and Sheriff Ewing McConnel leaned inside.

He held the lantern above his head to light the interior of the coach, so that his hatbrim cast the top part of his face into black shadow, from which his eyes gleamed like the business ends of two Colts.

"Ah yes," he said. "Louis Calvert. I saw *Uncle Tom's Cabin* last night. Allow me to congratulate you, sir. I hate to cause you all this trouble, but we're hunting a murderer."

The sheriff's eyes jumped around the passengers one by one, seeming to flicker as they rested upon Bandelier. Calvert threw up his arm in a dramatic gesture.

"I don't understand you, sir. Obviously there is no one in here but my troupe. We're nothing but a group of simple actors going about our business of bringing a touch of civilization to this barbarous land. . . ."

Bandelier felt his hand on the window strap draw up with increasing tension. As each rolling syllable left Calvert's lips, McConnel's eyes seemed to grow more narrow with suspicion.

"...Moreover, sir, you are holding up the United States mails. I'm sure you're aware what a felony that is."

"Take it easy, Calvert," McConnel broke in sharply. "There's nothing to get excited about." He glanced at Bandelier. "I didn't see you in the play last night."

"He's our new second lead," Calvert orated. "All the way from Mexico City. A man of international fame. One of the greatest—"

"Why not let him speak for himself?" asked McConnel, impatiently.

Bandelier met the sheriff's eyes calmly, and spoke in a soft, casual voice. "My name is Montoyo Gonbales, *señor jertif*. I was honored with an offer to play in the distinguished Calvert Stock company when their second lead jumped the show in San Francisco. I only arrived here this evening."

"You ain't got much of an accent."

"Do you expect a *peon*, *señor*?"

McConnel's hat brim hid his whole face, with the downward tip of his head. "I beg your pardon, *señor*—"

"Sheriff," said Persia, leaning forward sharply.

McConnel's brim lifted again, revealing those bright eyes. "Ma'am?"

Persia remained bent forward, a mingling of expressions filling her face. A horse stirred restlessly outside. Persia's eyes swung to Bandelier. Anger tinted her cheeks. Then she settled back, forcing a rueful little laugh.

"I guess I'm just nervous. We've heard Reboe Ayers has been holding up stages again."

McConnel hesitated, staring narrowed-eyed at her. Then he stepped back, touching his hat brim. "Reboe's only interested in the gold coming down from the mines, ma'am." The door shut with a slam. "All right, Hack. Whip 'em up."

The coach lurched, and Calvert sank back, whipping out his handkerchief. "'Now sure's the moment I ought to die, lest some hereafter bitterness impair this joy,'" he panted, mopping his brow. "Holy Beelzebub! I thought he was going to string us up."

"He would certainly have done something if you'd kept up that tirade," said Kendall, the leading man. "What did you think you were doing—*King Lear*? You were making him suspicious."

"Was I?" Calvert's pouched eyes widened in surprise. A vague, hurt look crossed his face. Then something sly filtered in. "Maybe you're right." His roguish eyes swung around to his niece. "Mabe I should have underplayed it, like Mr. Gonzales."

CHAPTER TWO

Gunstop

BANDELIER arrived at the dressing room he shared with Calvert at eight o'clock the night they opened in Downieville, to find that the older man was not there. Bandelier began putting on the dove-colored trousers he wore in

the *Prairie Wife*. Every now and then the floor shuddered as Sam Dent practiced his falls in the next room. Bandelier was about to put on his frilled stock when the door opened and Louis Calvert came staggering in. He tripped over an open trunk and half fell into an arm chair.

"Louis, you old fool," Bandelier said. "Don't you know we go on in half an hour?"

Calvert's facile mouth formed a silly grin. "I'll be all right," he said, grinning broadly.

"With a bucket of ice water," snapped Bandelier. He got the bucket of water they had been using to wash in and put it before Calvert. "Now dip your head in."

Calvert started to protest. Bandelier grabbed him, forcing that shaggy, leonine head forward between Calvert's knees and down into ice-cold water taken straight from the North Yuba. When he released the man, Calvert reared up, sputtering like a walrus.

"The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon!" he roared. "'Go—'" he trailed off, shaking his head. Then he sank back. "I forget the rest," he mumbled. His chin sank onto his chest, and he sprawled there in the chair, staring blankly before him, while Bandelier pulled the ever-present pot of coffee over the flames of their little wood stove.

"Thanks, son," Calvert said at last. "That did clear my head a little. Hate to have Persia see me in this condition." He shook his head sadly. "I guess you wonder why I act this way. You've been with us four days since Sacramento and seen me drunk three of them."

"I figured it was something in your past. You never married?"

Calvert snorted disgusted. "Nothing as easy as a broken love affair. You see before you a failure, Ray. Thrown to the dogs, playing the sticks. I would be in New York now, Wallack's. Star billing.

If they'd only let me do it the way I wanted." He seemed to shrink in the chair, staring off into that distance, and his voice became very soft. "Underplaying, Ray. No more gestures, no more ham, no more licking the boots of the gallery gods."

Bandelier's eyes narrowed, and he almost whispered it. "You too?"

Calvert looked up with a small, rueful laugh. "Why do you think I'd seen so many of your plays? I've had the same idea as you for half my life, son. It's time for a change in the theater. All this melodrama has to go. But I didn't have what it takes. I tried again and again to put it across, and failed. I guess I've been hamming so long, I couldn't underplay if I had to. I nearly ruined it for you with McConnel, didn't I?"

Bandelier stared at Calvert, seeing him in a wholly different light, as he realized how the old man had been smashed by failure of the same dream he himself had cherished for so long. It gave him a poignant sense of rapport with Calvert, in that moment. Perhaps Calvert felt it. His head jerked up, his bleary eyes focussed on Bandelier.

"Sure," he said. "Why do you think I was so quick to help you? Our bond goes deeper than the mere profession, boy. I don't want it to ruin you the way it's ruined me. You're pretty close to it now, aren't you? You failed in New York and you've come out here to fail again."

Bandelier felt his head lower as the bitterness of his defeat returned to him. "I guess so. It was getting so I couldn't find booking any place back East. I thought it would be easier out here. It was worse. I finally had to take up prospecting to exist."

"You're still pretty rusty, having trouble picking up your lines."

"It isn't only that I've lost my confidence," Bandelier told him. "If Persia would only quit riding me. I'd think, be-

ing your niece, she'd understand what I'm trying to do."

"That's the point, son. She saw it ruin me. She saw me laughed off the stages of New York. The worst part of it is, you'll have to go along with her. The bulk of the public will have to be educated to underplaying before they'll accept it. These miners want ham. All I have to do is throw up my arm and bellow at the gallery and they cover the stage with bags of gold—" he broke off, smiling ruefully. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to give you another tirade."

"I understand," Bandelier smiled.

Calvert came over to catch his arm. "I think you do. That's why I want so to help you. Have you been able to remember anything else about what happened in Jordan's office? Any clue that might give us a lead to who really did it. The way I heard it, people in neighboring offices saw you go into Jordan's office about five. They heard the shots about six and ran in to find Jordan dead and somebody going out the window."

"But I only stayed in his office for ten minutes. I must have left about ten after five. Surely somebody saw me go."

"Nobody's come up who did. It leaves you in a hole."

"He'll be in a deeper hole if he doesn't come out and at least try to rehearse those lines," Persia said, from the doorway.

Bandelier wheeled to stare in surprise, and then crossed in front of Calvert to hide the man's condition, closing the door behind him and following Persia out onto the stage. Here she turned to him.

"Now. You're over by the table. You're a rich planter's son who wants to marry me. You can't understand why I prefer a poor farmer to you. Please try to get a little anger, a little frustration into your voice. For just once, forget about your natural school. To me, it's just a name to cover a lack of technique."

A flush rose into his face. "All right. I

can't understand why you want to marry a poor farmer. But I can understand why you hate natural acting." He found himself walking towards her. "You're afraid to give me a chance. You're afraid I'll show you up for the ham you are."

"That's the last time you'll call me a ham!" she said, hotly.

He caught her hand before the slap could land. Perhaps it was that beneath all the antipathy he felt towards her, he still could not deny what her beauty did to him. He found himself pulling her close, kissing her, fiercely. Then he let her go.

"How's that for anger?" he asked.

She stood staring at him a moment longer. Then, with a small sound of rage, she wheeled and walked to the wings.

THE theater was filled at eighty-thirty. Persia and Louis Calvert had the bulk of the first scene, and Bandelier watched from the wings. Towards the end of the act, some latecomers made a stir in the crowd. An immense, red-bearded man appeared in the door at the upper end of one aisle, surveying the crowd from beneath the downtilted brim of his black slouch hat.

Then it was a narrow, grimy man in a great sombrero, with a livid knife scar running from eye to mouth. He looked to be one of the men from Chile who had come north to work the mines. At this moment, Persia brought the house down with her curtain line. Roaring and shouting, the miners rose in their seats, raining coins and pokes of gold dust on the stage, as was their custom when a play pleased them. It was a big crowd, and the money and bags of dust piled up until there must have been thousands of dollars on the stage. The gigantic redhead walked down the aisle, a handful of coins in his hand, as if to throw them at Persia. But when he reached the footlights, he climbed up over them. Before anyone realized his intent, he had pulled a big Navy revolver

from its holster beneath his long coat.

"Just keep your seats," he roared. "We're taking this gold and whatever else you've got on you. Throw it out into the aisles. And don't try to keep your watches."

A bedlam of roaring and shouting lifted from the miners. There was a violent little stir from a seat on the aisle, near the rear. Before this movement finished, a shot made its deafening explosion in the room. A miner reared up from that seat on the aisle, his gun still half-lifted toward the redhead on the stage. Then he pitched onto his face in the aisle.

It was only then that Bandelier saw the Mexican dressed in a gaudy *charro* outfit, standing in the rear door behind the *Chileno*, and blowing smoke from the tip of his gun.

"Anybody else want to try hees luck, now's the time, *Señores*," he called.

"It sure is," laughed the redhead, and started emptying his gun at the footlights. The miners in the front rows began scrambling to the aisles for safety. But the man was only darkening the stage so he would be a poorer target. When his gun was empty, it left but one footlight burning, casting the stage into deep shadow. A pair of men stepped from the wings and began gathering up the pokes of gold dust and money and stuffing them in the saddlebags they carried. Then they jumped off the stage into the aisles and picked up the sacks and pokes the men had thrown here, while the Mexican and the *Chileno* held the crowd at bay. The redhead finished reloading his gun, and walked over to Persia, swinging an arm around her waist before she could jump away.

"I think you'll ride along with Reboe a piece, little gal. They won't be so eager to follow if they know it will mean you get hurt."

Louis Calvert was near his niece, and he caught at Reboe's arm. "Now, look here, you redheaded buffoon—"

"Lay off, old man," shouted Reboe, swinging his arm around without releasing Persia, and bringing it in against Calvert so viciously the actor was knocked over backward. This wheeled the red-head away from where Bandelier still stood in the wings. The actor took his chance, jumping out at the man, hands outstretched to hook that gun arm. But he had not seen the curtain rope coiled on the floor. It snarled his left foot, tripping him headlong. Reboe wheeled back, gun lifting up. Then he saw what had happened, and threw back his head to laugh.

"You must be the comedian!" he shouted. "I wish we could take you along for laughs."

In that last moment, Bandelier raised his head dazedly to see the intense disappointment and disgust in Persia's face as she looked down at him. Then Reboe caught her up and swung her over his shoulder as easily as if she had been half her weight. Holding her there with one arm, he dropped off the stage and followed his men up the aisle, stooping now and then to snatch up a watch thrown into the aisle which his men had overlooked. The *Chileno* and the Mexican kept the crowd at bay till a few minutes after Reboe had disappeared, then they too ran out.

Seething with humiliation, Bandelier followed the rush of miners up the aisle. They were all running over that man who had been killed near the rear, and Bandelier halted here to scoop the Colt from his hand. Firing had already broken out on the street, from the miners who were now in the open. But Reboe and his men had already swung around a corner and disappeared. The only one in sight, as Bandelier ran across the sidewalk, was the Mexican. He was several buildings down, still fighting to mount an excited horse. The miners were firing at him, but they were as excited as the animal, and had not hit the man yet. Bandelier jumped off the curb with both feet, to halt his im-

petus, and waited till the jar of landing was over, and then fired. The Mexican had just swung up at the saddle, his right leg still in midair. He hung that way a moment, then fell back into the street, with the horse galloping off. Calvert was at Bandelier's side now, staring blankly at the Mexican.

"You didn't tell me you could shoot like that, Ray."

"Man has to learn more than prospecting to stay alive in these hills. I found I had a great talent for it, and I practiced incessantly," Bandelier told him grimly. "We've got to stop these miners from going after Persia, Louis."

Some of the men had spread out along the hitchrack to getting horses, and Calvert turned their way, shouting at them. "Don't do that. They'll kill my niece if you follow. Didn't you hear what the redhead said?"

The mounted men swung their horses to a stop in the middle of the street, frowning at Calvert. Then, as the full implications of what he had said struck them, horsebackers drew their fiddling mounts in around Calvert.

"What'll we do?" one of them asked. "We can't just let them get away!"

Bandelier moved down toward the Mexican that had been killed. A few of the men followed, drawn by his movement. Bandelier frowned down at the body, something working in his mind. "The bandits didn't see this man killed, did they?" he asked.

"No," answered a miner. "They were all on around the corner."

Calvert had moved over, staring at Bandelier. "Ray, what's on your mind?"

"If I could masquerade as one Mexican, I can do it as another," said Bandelier. "The stage was dark. Reboe didn't get a very good look at me. This Mexican's about my height and build."

As he finished, the gathering crowd parted again before the pressure of a

ridden horse, and Bandelier looked up to see Sheriff Ewing McConnel sitting the saddle above him.

"It's lucky you come, Sheriff," said one of the men. Reboe Ayers just held up the theater."

McConnel spoke without taking his gimlet eyes off Bandelier. "How do you know it was Reboe? I heard he was down by Marysville."

"He got all our watches. That's his trademark, ain't it? I've heard he has hundreds of 'em."

"Your own sheriff can handle that," answered McConnel. "I came after this man."

"But, Sheriff," Bandelier answered. "I am *Señor*—"

"Ray Bandelier," finished McConnel. "One of the stagehands in the Sacramento theater saw you go in Calvert's dressing room as a Yankee and come out a Mexican. He didn't tie it up at first, but I got around to questioning him day before yesterday."

Calvert thundered, "This town isn't in your county. You haven't got any official capacity here!"

McConnel leaned forward, voice bitterly deliberate. "My capacity is that Henry Jordan and I came here together from the east. He put me in this office. Whatever his faults, he was my friend, and I'm taking back his murderer."

Bandelier caught at McConnel's stirrup leather. "Listen, Sheriff. Reboe's taken Persia Calvert as hostage. They'll kill her if a posse goes after her."

"If it's that bad, I'll go after them alone," said McConnel. "But first I'll see you in this town's calaboose."

"You're too well known," Bandelier insisted. "You couldn't get within ten miles of them. I won't argue with you about my innocence in the Jordan murder. All I ask is this one chance to go after Persia. I'll disguise myself as this dead Mexican. If I fail, you can have me."

"I'll put myself in your custody, Sheriff," offered Calvert, dramatically. "If Ray doesn't return, you can hold me as an accomplice to Jordan's murder. After all, I did help Bandelier escape."

McConnel stared in surprise at Calvert. "That's quite a recommendation from you."

"I have that much faith that Bandelier isn't a murderer, and that he can get my niece where nobody else can," answered Calvert. "Her life depends on it, Sheriff."

McConnel settled heavily into the saddle, frowning to himself. Absently he took a smashed coin from his pocket, and began to flip it. Finally he spoke.

"All right. I'm a damn fool, but all right."

"We'd better get you made up," Calvert said, grabbing Bandelier's arm. Then he wiped at his brow and tried to laugh in a pathetic attempt at his habitual theatrics. "Beelzebub! Edwin Booth never got a chance to play a part like this!"

CHAPTER THREE

Painted Devil

BANDELIER had spent enough time in the mountains these last two years to pick up some tracking. He followed the bandits from Downieville, well enough, in the moonlit night. They turned off the road near Comptonville, however, crossed a stream, and he lost the tracks.

It was then that he had to take a chance. During his time prospecting through the Sierras, he had heard many tales of Reboe Ayers. One of his favorite stopping places and hideouts was supposed to be the Florida House, set up on the dizzying heights above Goodyear's Bar, along one of the least accessible sections of the Downieville Road. Bandelier stopped tracking and headed straight through Comptonville, on up the road, to reach the

Florida House near midnight that night.

It was a two-story log structure with a tall hip roof and a chimney at either end. There was no one about outside, but Bandelier saw half a dozen horses in the corral covered with the briny mottling of dried sweat. He hitched his animal at the rack in front and stepped up on the porch and through the door. The great taproom was empty, save for the bartender, who looked up in surprise.

"Lola!" called the barman, sharply.

There was the shudder of stairs, and a voluptuous Mexican woman appeared in the hall, flounced skirt swinging. This was Lola Salazar, the mistress of the Florida House. There was nothing sinister in the smile that broke over her dark face now, however.

"Peso!" she cried, running forward and flinging her arms about him in a hug that would have made a mother bear ashamed. "We thought you had been shot or something!"

"My horse was shot out from under me," he told her, in Spanish. "Are the others here?"

"In the back room," she told him, leading him down the hall and flinging open a heavy door on one side to reveal another taproom. This was a filthy den, littered with riding gear and blanket rolls, a long split-log table running down the center, about which sat half a dozen men. At the head, just setting down a tankard he had drained, was Reboe Ayers.

"Peso!" he bawled, rising to his feet. "We thought they'd got you for sure. Come here and sit between *Chileno* and me. Lola, tell that lazy muck of a husband to get our pard come food and drink. And where's the girl? I told you to bring her down."

"She is tired," protested Lola.

"Bring her down," shouted Reboe, pounding on the table with his tankard.

Lola looked at him resentfully, then turned to flounce out. Meanwhile, Bander-

lied had seated himself beside the dark, scarred man from Chile, who was already grinning foolishly with drink. The candle lighting this end of the table was set in a tin scone beside a bowl of bread. Bandelier saw Reboe frowning at him narrowly, and reached out to grab for the bread, allowing his arm to strike the candle. It went over, sputtering against the table, to go out.

"Hell!" shouted a man from across the table. "Now I can't see to eat."

"Don't be crazy," Chileno laughed. "It's light as day, ain't it, Peso. Show us how."

He tossed a coin into the air. Bandelier glanced up at it blankly. Reboe bent drunkenly towards him.

"What's the matter, Peso? Losing your touch?"

Bandelier remembered that smashed coin McConnell had been flipping in Downieville. It tied in, somehow, but he did not understand yet. He shook his head wearily.

"I guess I'm just tired. They got my horse. I had to hide out in town a couple of hours."

Reboe was staring intently at him. "What happened to your hair? Get it cut?"

Bandelier raised his head to see the suspicion in the man's eyes. Before he could answer, the door opened again, and Lola ushered Persia Calvert in.

Her face was taut with strain, but her eyes met the men's defiantly. Reboe made a guttural sound of appreciation deep in his throat, and rose to lurch down the table to the girl.

"Now, li'l actress," he said. "We want some entertainment. Give Reboe a kiss and I'll let you get up on the table and dance for us."

He tried to swing her around and kiss her, but she blocked him off with an arm, struggling violently. It was all Bandelier could do to contain himself. Suddenly one

of Persia's hands flashed up, clawing across Reboe's eye. He jumped back.

"You little witch!" he roared.

Bandelier stepped in front of the man, as he lurched back toward Persia. "Maybe she do better with couple of drinks," he said.

Reboe swayed back and forth, suspicion tightening his single good eye. But he was just drunk enough to find the sudden, illogical humor in that, and he began to chuckle.

"You're right, Peso," he said, and wheeled heavily towards the table. The whiskey was at the other end, and he shouted for *Chileno* to bring it to him. Persia had backed over against the wall, and it gave Bandelier that instant to move over by her.

"How about underplaying now, Persia?" he muttered. "Or would you rather I hammed it up and got our throats slit?" He saw shock widen her eyes. Then a wild relief slackened her whole face, parting the lips. She breathed his name. "Yes," he said. "It's Bandelier. Tell me quick. What's this about Peso? The coin they toss up."

"I heard them talking." Her voice was a tense whisper. "He shoots it. Nine out of ten."

"I've done my share of shooting," Bandelier told her.

Reboe's voice welled up out of the babble of the other men. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Bandelier turned to face him with that faint smirk. "What would any man talk about, *amigo*, with a woman such as this?"

Reboe grabbed his wrist in a grip that compressed Bandelier's lips with the pain. "You ain't cutting in on me, Peso. Leave the girl alone."

Still smiling, Bandelier asked, "Would you like me to shoot your ears off?"

That suspicion glittered in Reboe's eyes. "How could you do that if you can't even hit this."

With his free hand he had fished a coin from his pocket, tossing it in the air. It took Bandelier by surprise, and Reboe still gripped his left wrist. Unable to turn towards the coin, Bandelier had to pull and shoot off to the side, with only the barest glance at the coin winking its brazen path through the feeble light. He fired once, and *Chileno* pounced for the coin as it struck the floor, and held it up to the light.

"You better hide your ears, Reboe," he said, "It's been hit."

REBOE still gripped Bandelier's wrist, staring into his face, and Bandelier knew he had to turn his mind from this quickly. "Speaking of smashed coins," he said. "McConnel was in Downieville about something while I was hiding out there. He had a smashed coin he kept flipping."

Reboe's eyes widened. "You didn't drop one in Jordan's office, did you?"

Bandelier tried to hide the sudden tension that stiffened his body. "Why would I do a stupid thing like that?" he asked. He shrugged, grinning at the man, and took a shot in the dark. "It wouldn't pin anything on me if I did."

"You were with me!" Reboe's voice raised to a guttural shout. "You can't get out of that!"

With a sudden vicious jerk, Bandelier pulled his wrist free of Reboe's hand. "Why do we get so excited about one little killing?" he said. "Are you having bad dreams?"

Reboe let out a disgusted laugh. "You'll have them before I do." He seemed to remember the girl. A leer swept the anger from his face, as he turned to her. "Give her a drink, *Chileno*. She looks pale."

Chileno had been standing by with a bottle and cups, and he poured Persia a shot. She held the cup out from her, staring at it disgustingly.

"Come on," snarled Reboe, impatiently.

"You was doing better than this on the stage."

"Si," Bandelier smiled. "She is a marvelous actress. I see her down in Marysville last year when the Calvert company was there. I particular like the last scene in that play about the ploughman. Remember, *Señorita*?"

She met his eyes, as if sensing he was trying to get something across to her. Then she forced a smile.

"I remember," she said, and lifted the liquor to her lips.

"That's better!" chortled Reboe. "Empty it up, and give me a kiss."

She choked on it, spat half of it out. Then she dropped the tin cup and sagged against the wall, a hand fluttering to her head.

"I feel dizzy," she moaned.

Reboe laughed. "You ought to."

He made a grab for her. She moaned again, turning aside from him to crumple to the floor. It was even more convincing than the faint she had done in *The Ploughman's Daughter*.

"Now see what you've done!" shrieked Lola, rushing between them to kneel beside Persia. "I told you she was delicate. You've made her sick with that atrocious stuff. Eduardo, help me carry this poor little pigeon upstairs."

Lola's husband came scurrying from the hall, and between them they carried Persia out. Reboe stared after them in drunken befuddlement. He turned to frown at Bandelier. Then he stumbled back to the table, cursing obscenely, and flung himself into the chair. The other men were raising a drunken, shouting hubbub now. Bandelier joined them. It took a long time for liquor and exhaustion to take effect. One by one, however, they fell asleep.

He found the stairs in a pitch black hall, rising to an upper hall lighted by one pine-knot torch. Lola's narrow, stooped husband stood before a door. Bandelier found cigarette papers in the pockets of Peso's

pants, began rolling one as he walked up to the man.

"How's the girl?"

"Sleeping. You can't get in. Lola told me nobody was to get in."

"At least give me a light, Eduardo."

The man's eyes dropped as he fished in his pocket. Bandelier pulled his gun. Eduardo tried to jerk his hand free. Bandelier caught him on the side of the neck with the barrel before he could block it. Bandelier stepped over his body, into the room.

"Persia?"

A bed squeaked, the floor trembled, she was in his arms. "Ray, Ray—"

"No time for talk. We've got to get out."

He led her through the silent house to a back door, and across the stony compound to a corral. He saddled up for her, helped her on. Then he caught one bareback, taking no time to put a saddle on for himself. At this moment, Lola's voice rang out from within the house.

"Eduardo, Eduardo! What have they done to you? Reboe!"

There were rattling sounds from the lower floor, a thick voice shouting. Bandelier and Persia had to round the house to the front to gain the trail that led to the road. As they clattered around by the porch, the front door was flung open, and Chileno ran into the moonlight, brandishing a gun. Bandelier shot first. It caught Chileno up and carried him back against the wall. He was still hanging there, as if spitted, when a man with a revolving Colt rifle appeared. Bandelier flung a pair of shots at him. The man ducked back inside, shouting something. Bandelier and the girl were out of range, now. As the house dropped from view, Bandelier saw Reboe come to the door, look after them, then wheel to head for the corral.

"He may catch us," she said. "There's a cutoff leading into the house from lower on the Downieville road. I heard them

talking about it. They can head us off!"

"Then flog up your horse!" he called to her.

Desperately they galloped down the narrow, winding trail. After a mile it struck the Downieville road. Bandelier wheeled southward there, hoping they could pass that cutoff before any of the gang.

A great black shape burst suddenly from what looked like a gully cut in the slope ahead. Persia's horse veered aside, almost going over the cliff. Bandelier could not turn that way without knocking her on over, so he went head-on into the shape.

The sudden smashing blow pitched him over his horse's head. He had the glimpse of another horse. Then he was going into the rider, carrying him off, with the squeal of animals rising shrilly from behind. Bandelier hit, grappled to the other man, and they rolled over twice.

Dazed, Bandelier tried to tear from underneath the other man. But the man raised above him, a dim shape in the darkness, with a great beard blotting out the bottom of his face. Reboe Ayers.

"Damn you, Peso," he snarled. "Trying to steal the gal!"

He smashed down with a blow that would have finished it then. But Bandelier threw up an arm to block it and jerked aside. Reboe's fist glanced off his forearm and went into the earth, with Reboe coming heavily against him. The man was off-balance in that instant, and Bandelier got a shoulder under him, and heaved him over.

Reboe grappled the actor against him as they rolled. Coming on top of the man and unable to raise up in Reboe's grip, Bandelier caught his beard, smashing Reboe's head against the rocks.

Reboe shouted and rolled on over with Bandelier. The actor could not keep the man's greater weight from carrying him over and under. But he managed to get a leg splayed out, and kept them rolling.

When he came up on top of Reboe once more, he smashed the man's head against the rocks again. The slope steepened, and they kept rolling. Each time he came up, Bandelier beat the man's head into the stone-studded earth that way. About the fifth time around, Reboe's arms were no longer holding Bandelier. Sucking in great, gasping breaths, Bandelier got to his hands and knees. He saw that no breath stirred Reboe's chest.

Persia had halted her horse and swung off down the road, and was running back up to him. Swaying there, he held out the watch.

"Think this'll clinch the case for McConnel?"

"If he'd found a smashed coin in Jordan's office, he must have already begun to suspect the possibility of your innocence," she said. "I don't think he would have let you come up here otherwise."

"I guess you're right. I'd been talking to a lot of miners about being grubstaked by Jordan. Reboe must have heard how much money Jordan meant to give me, and followed me to his office that day." Bandelier glanced back of them. "We'd better take off. If none of the others have come out of that cutoff by now, it must mean they took the long way after us. That'll give us a few minutes. When they find Reboe dead, I doubt if they'll come on after us." He wheeled back, catching her elbows. "You'll back me up by telling McConnel what Reboe said about murdering Jordan?"

"I'll tell McConnel everything," she murmured. "I'll tell him how wonderful your new school of acting is. I didn't even know it was you till you told me. I'll never ham again, Ray. But there's one thing I never want you to underplay."

"What's that?"

"This."

Her lips were cool at first. Then warm. She was right. It was something he would never underplay.

Somewhere in the Dragoons he lies, the terror of the plains, who made a pact in blood with his worst enemy—and kept it till it killed him!



For twelve years Cochise led his marauding legions in bloody raids. . . .

BULLET BARGAIN

By BUD SWANSON

CHIEF Cochise halted the Apache hunting party. He shaded his eyes against the blinding sun, and studied the typhoon of dust rising across the desert floor.

"Soldiers," he grunted, and there was no love in his grumbling tone.

Some of the braves turned their mustangs around, but Cochise stayed them with a command. He understood their

feelings of trepidation whenever the white man was involved. However, he had come down into the valley on a desperate mission, and he did not wish to return when it was still unfulfilled.

"Come with flag of peace," he announced with some degree of relief upon close observation a few minutes later.

A column of United States cavalry came out of the cloud of dust, the horses

blowing; the troopers cursing and choking and saddlesore. From their ranks flew a flag of truce. The captain was obviously surprised at the sight of the ragged band of Indians. When he recognized the Apache chieftain, he smiled.

"Cochise!" he exclaimed. "We've been looking all over hell for you."

Chief Cochise did not understand. His reply was given innocently, and with no attempt at humor.

"Cochise not live in place white man speak. Cochise live in mountains."

The troop snickered. The captain scowled them silent.

"Got to take you in, Cochise," the cavalry leader said. "A ranch has been raided in the valley, and a white child's been stolen."

Cochise's legs tightened around his mustang's belly, and he shook his head in vigorous denial.

"Not true," he muttered slowly. "Only this sun brings us down into valley. No meat in mountains. Squaws need meat."

The captain signaled to the troop, and to a man their carbines came up.

"Come on, Cochise," the captain said gruffly. "You can tell it to the general."

This was Arizona in 1861. It was to be the beginning of twelve long years in which Cochise, chief of the Chiricahua Apache, would terrorize the Southwest, leading his marauding legions on bloody raids upon emigrant trains, stagecoaches, ranches and settlements. Perhaps if he had not been falsely accused, he would never have been called a "bad Indian."

Taken into custody of an army camp, Cochise's treatment was no better. After several days of imprisonment, it became apparent that he would never hunt again if he waited for the white man to free him. In his own camp, meat was woefully lacking. The squaws and papooses would go hungry. A slow, terrible hate against the white man was cankering within him.

If he was to be punished for something he did not do, what good was it to remain in the mountains and not fight? Yes, it was better to fight; better even to die in battle than never to be free. He did not like this camp of white men. He did not like the measured soldier step on watch outside the tent where he and his braves were confined. Even the food they gave him was bad, and everywhere there was a civilized smell he did not understand.

Unable to endure the torture of captivity any longer, Chief Cochise cut the flap of his tent with a knife his searchers had overlooked. He looked out across the desert, where the stars hung full and bright above his home in the Dragoon Mountains; the air was cool and fresh, and the moonlight glinted on the *Saguaro* trees.

Suddenly he slashed the tent wide open, and whispered to his companions. Now the night was full of noise. The guards were running forward, their heavy boots crunching on shale rock. A rifle crashed near at hand. An Indian buck fell away from Cochise's side, rolled over and lay still. The Apache warrior saw four of his braves struggling with the soldiers, heard the crushing blows fall, and he knew they were again captured.

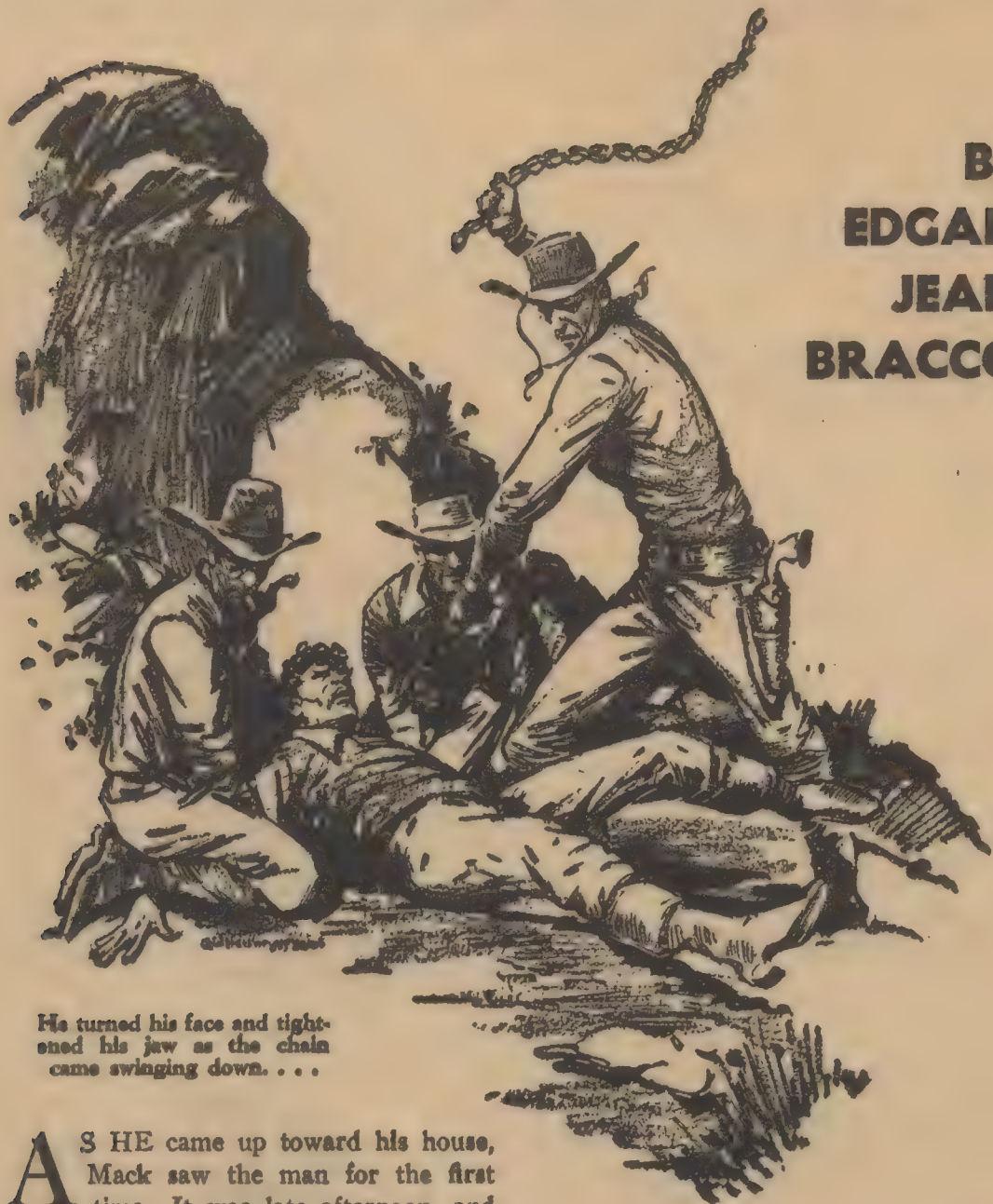
Cochise ran out into the desert where the moonlight beckoned along the sand floor. The guns barked behind him. Three times the smashing impact of bullets jarred his body. Once he dropped to his knees, and felt blood in his moccasins, but he got up and ran on . . . out into the night, out into the desert and freedom.

At last Cochise staggered back to his people. They took care of him, ministering to his needs, and obeyed his most trifling whims. Much of his time was spent lying on the rocks of the Dragoon Mountains. The warm sun helped to heal his ugly wounds, and soon he was strong again. When his strength returned, he

(Continued on page 126)

This Range Is Mine!

By
**EDGAR
JEAN
BRACCO**



He turned his face and tightened his jaw as the chain came swinging down. . . .

AS HE came up toward his house, Mack saw the man for the first time. It was late afternoon, and Mack had been feeding the pigs in the hollow. He had paused to watch them—two grunting masses already close to two hundred. Pork hereabouts didn't dress much, he knew, but the little money would come in handy, mighty handy. Bess needed things—clothes mostly. And he'd get her some little doodad. It'd been a long

Only the dead sided Randall when he fought for the law on the devil's range—and he knew that he'd have to win for them—or join them!

time since she had anything nice, he remembered.

He saw the stranger as he topped the rise and came around his sagging barn. He stopped, his fingers tightening around the handle of the swill pail. He swore softly, remembering the holster that was hanging in the kitchen. A feeling of unrest, like the puff of warm wind before a summer storm, took hold of him.

Then he shrugged and forced a grin. "Howdy," he said.

The other nodded without smiling. His small, closely-set eyes ran over Mack, then around at the buildings of the small ranch. He was as tall as Mack, but where Mack was lean and stringy, the stranger was heavy, with an unhealthy grossness that reminded Mack of his pigs. He was unshaven, and occasionally he passed the sleeve of his dirty summer shirt across his cheek with a rising, raspy sound.

"I'm Mack Randall." The younger man held out his hand.

"Bart Slocum." He made no move to take the offered hand.

Mack's jaw twisted and he stepped forward.

"Mack." A soft voice stopped him. Looking up, he saw that Bess had come out on the porch.

Slocum's small eyes narrowed, and he stared with obvious interest at the girl. She wasn't tall, but Mack often said she was built so that nobody noticed height. Her gleaming black hair hung below her shoulders, and her dark eyes swung slowly from Slocum's insolent face to Mack's, questioning.

"My wife," Mack said.

Slocum nodded again.

"Something up, Slocum?" Mack asked.

"Why, no," the other said innocently. "Nothin's up. Just thought I'd come by to welcome you. Ain't been here long, have you?"

"Not long."

Slocum's eyes wandered over the old

house and barn with evident ridicule. "Why?"

At a sign from Bess, Mack held himself back. "Going to dairy."

"House kind of beat, ain't it?"

"If you know anything about dairying, Slocum, you know when a man has just so much money, he puts it into stock. Can't make a living investing in a house."

"This is cattle country, sonny. Ain't much use for dairyin' around here. Most people in these parts don't have much use for milk."

Or water, either, Mack wanted to add, as his eyes ran over Slocum's unwashed face. But all he said was, "Lots of homesteaders coming out here. They'll have kids."

Slocum shrugged. "This is rough country right now. I know I couldn't bring a gal like that to a place like this." His eyes thinned as they ran over Bess.

"Slocum, you're not here socially. If you've got a point, get to it."

"Why, I got no point," the other answered amiably. "Course I did have sort of a neighborly offer. Lots o' people are glad to take it."

It was then that Mack noticed the two men standing beside their horses under a clump of trees down the road. He was outwardly calm as he asked, "What offer?"

Slocum took a half-smoked cigar from his shirt pocket, lit it, and stared thoughtfully at the end. "It's like this, Randall. Things can happen to a man's stock, his barn, his house. You know, little accidents—neighbors far away—can't get to him in time. Well, lots o' people in this territory are awful glad to pay me twenty a month to see nothin' happens."

Mack heard Bess draw in her breath sharply, but he didn't take his eyes from Slocum's stubbled face. "I read about those things," he said evenly, "but I thought they only worked them back east in the cities."

The other's mouth opened in a leer. "Things happen all over, Randall—not only in cities."

With a sudden snarl, Mack grabbed a handful of Slocum's shirt just below the throat and twisted. "You'd better haul your fat carcass off my land before I feed it to the pigs. I take care of my own. I've got hands, Slocum, and a twelve gauge sitting near the window. It's loaded with rock salt, and if I catch anybody around here who shouldn't be, he'll be screaming till doomsday from the salt." He gave Slocum a shove toward the gate. "And if somebody just touches my wife, the twelve gauge won't be carrying rock salt. Now move."

The two men down the road straightened expectantly. Slocum stepped back. "Not now, boys," he growled.

Mack went up the porch steps, and with his arm around Bess' shoulders, watched the three men mount and ride away.

"Mack," Bess said, "do you think—"

"I don't know, Bess. Men like him are cowards. They scare easy. But sometimes there are a lot of them and they pool their courage."

THE next morning, only six of Mack's nine Holsteins came in from night pasture. With a mounting restlessness he milked them in double-quick time, then ran out to the pasture. He found nothing until he passed beyond the line of trees into his last field. Then he stopped short. He said nothing, because he should have expected it. But his jaw twisted.

His other three Holsteins lay close to each other, their throats slit. They were cold, and he judged it had been done a few hours after darkness.

Up at the house he told Bess, "I'm riding into town."

"Mack, what—did they—"

"Three Holsteins. Keep the twelve gauge handy till I get back."

He kissed her quickly, then saddled his stallion, strapped on his Colt, and thundered into town in a cloud of dust. The stallion was covered with sweat from the long ride when Mack leaped out of the saddle, slipped the hackamore off, and made for the marshal's office.

Inside, he found Waters, the tall and burly marshal, alternately sipping coffee from a thick mug and paring his fingernails with a wicked-looking Comanche knife. At his invitation Mack sat down beside the desk, refused coffee, and came to his point.

"What do you know about Bart Slocum?"

Waters winced. "Too much. And not enough. Take your choice."

"Your riddle's over my head, Marshal, but Slocum isn't. I'm Mack Randall. I own the old ranch up the hill beyond the castle butte. Going to dairy. Yesterday Slocum came by with a shakedown proposition. I told him what he could do with it, and this morning I found three of my cows dead." Mack's dark eyes smoldered restlessly, and his breathing was deeper. "I'm not a killing man, Marshal, but if Slocum doesn't get his from the law, he'll get it from me."

"Relax, Randall." Waters put down his coffee mug and pulled a folder from his desk. "Maybe you think you're the only one. Well," he waved a fistful of papers, "there are more than twenty complaints just like yours against Slocum. From all over the territory. He's been at this a long time."

"What's the law in such a hurry for?" Mack snapped.

"Before you get too smart, Randall, suppose you stop and figure. You ever hear of evidence?"

"Evidence?" Mack cried. "Aren't three cows—"

"They're evidence somebody killed 'em.

They don't prove Slocum's the somebody." He leaned forward. "I want Slocum to hang just as much as you do. There have been killings around here, and I'd swear my eyes away that he was behind them. And there have been a lot of beatings hereabouts. I know it like I know my name is Waters that Slocum engineered them. One of them made me want to go after him with my bare hands. The young wife of a rancher down the valley."

He drew a breath. "But I don't work like some marshals do. They hang a man first and pin the crime on him after. And Slocum knows that. He makes sure nobody watches him at work. But somebody'll trip him up. Lots of people are trying it, because there's a nice fat reward for the conviction of whoever's running the racket in this territory. We just have to catch him at it once. Then we can bring up the charges of all the other people who got stung. Then even the slim murder evidence we have now will hold water."

He stood up. "Well, Randall, if you're out to get him, good luck. But if I was you, I'd keep my nose clean. You'll save trouble if you pay what he asks. He can't last much longer."

Mack left, cursing to himself. He stopped at the trading post to pick up as much provisions as he could load on the stallion, and started for home.

He was passing a lonely stretch of trail. All around him was the green brightness of *palo verde* and prickly pear. It was just as he came out of a grove of *saguaro*s that he heard the shot and felt the breeze from the lead go whistling past his ear. He dropped out of the saddle and lay flat, his Colt ready, his eyes sweeping the landscape.

He squinted against the sun, but saw no one. He knew that whoever had drawn a bead on him had deliberately missed. He had been stopped for a reason. His stallion had wandered off a few paces. Mack

was just considering a dash for it—a leap into the saddle and a mad race up the trail.

Then he grinned. That would be a real cute setup. He'd be picked off like a clay duck in a fairground shooting gallery. Besides, that would be running. And he'd be damned if he'd backtrack from any rattlesnake who fired from behind cover at an unsuspecting man. He'd—

"Drop it, Randall. You're covered." The voice came from behind him. With a low curse Mack flipped the gun away from him and waited.

In a moment he heard footsteps coming out of the *saguaro* grove. Without rising he looked sideways. Three pairs of boot-ed feet were circled around him. Slowly he stood up and saw Slocum and his two men.

"Nice shooting, Slocum," Mack said.

Slocum shrugged.

"You usually plug people in the back?"

Slocum said nothing, but his face hardened.

"Well?" Mack's eyes were cautious.

"Hear you had some trouble," Slocum said, squirming his thick lips into a grin. The other men stepped back, their hands ready near their holsters.

"Yeah," Mack answered. "Three of my cows slit their throats on barbed wire."

"That so? Barbed wire, eh?" Slocum shook his head regretfully. "Sad. Holsteins are worth money, they tell me. How many more'd you say you had?"

"Didn't say," Mack replied evenly. "But the answer's six."

The other nodded reflectively. "Six, eh? You know, Randall, you could get rid of that barbed wire."

"I'm going to. But not by handing out twenty bucks a month to a gunslinger."

Slocum's eyes lighted murderously, but he didn't lose the fleshy smile. "Boys, looks like sonny here needs some more talking to."

Mack felt the skin on his back shrivel as

Slocum and one of the men came forward. The other went back into the grove. Mack backed until he was up against the stallion, getting a small measure of comfort from its hard solidity behind him. His eyes moved swiftly, alert for any sudden move. His fists were held ready at his sides, clenched and tense.

Suddenly, at a sound from Slocum, the two men lunged. They swung wildly, and for a while Mack kept away from their blows. He aimed his fists at Slocum. Against the other man he had no grudge. But when his knuckles sank deep into Slocum's stomach, he almost laughed with satisfaction. He was so intent on cutting into Slocum that he dropped his guard for a second, and the other man caught him squarely on the ear. He shook his head to clear it and in that moment they had him. It took only a second for them to pin him down, one sitting on each arm.

"Harry," Slocum called. The third man came back out of the grove, carrying a length of thick chain.

"Go ahead, Harry," Slocum said.

As the man began to swing the chain, Mack threw his whole strength into a lurch to free his arms. But he was held too securely. He turned his face and tightened his jaw as the chain came swinging down on his unprotected legs. . .

HE CAME out of a pain-filled nightmare and saw Bess looking down at him. He was home, in bed, and there was a smell of medicine in the air. Through the window he saw the light of late afternoon.

"Mack," Bess whispered, putting her face close to his. "Oh, Mack." . . .

He touched her hair softly. "It's all right, Bess. It took three of them and a chain to get me. What are the damages?"

"When you didn't get back, I hitched the mare to the rig and went out for you. I got you home, then rode out for a doctor."

"What are the damages?" he repeated stubbornly.

"Your legs. They're pretty cut up. Especially the left one."

He pulled the bedclothes aside. His left leg was swathed and bandaged until it looked like some appalling monstrosity that couldn't be part of him. But he remembered Harry swinging the heavy chain. He winced. It was part of him, all right. There was a throbbing in it which seemed to increase with each coursing of the blood through his veins. He tried to forget it by holding Bess to him and telling her what he intended to do on the ranch.

"Next year I'll farm the back acres to cut feed bills. And then I'll build a silo, and maybe lay in some more stock. Then. . ."

She was kneeling beside the bed, staring up into his face from the crook of his arm. Her eyes were wide, and her gleaming hair lay like a dark fog around her lovely face.

"And maybe," he went on, "you won't have to work so hard—"

"Mack, can't the marshal get him?"

He was forced back to the present and the pain. "He's up against a wall. There's no evidence. Waters knows Slocum's behind this thing and a couple of murders. But he's smart. When he pulls some dirt, like he did on me today, he makes sure nobody's around. I can accuse him till the moon turns green, but what can I prove it with?"

"But Mack! Your leg!" Bess' eyes crackled with a quick flare of anger. "He can't do something like that!"

"No?" Mack grinned feebly.

"Oh, I know," Bess said. "He did. But isn't there a way to get him?"

His eyes were distant, and a crease of thought rippled his forehead.

Suddenly Bess stiffened. Her head came up. Mack listened hard, heard the soft crunch of feet outside the window.

His gaze flashed to the shotgun leaning in the corner. "Quick," he whispered, pointing.

With a soft cry Bess sprang toward it, but she was too late. The door flew open. Slocum charged in and blocked her way to the shotgun. With a half sob she backed away from him and sat on the bed beside Mack.

Slocum stared at her a moment, then turned his pig eyes on Mack. An oily smile was on his lips. "Accident, Randall?"

"Yeah, Slocum. Accident." Mack's face hardened. "The last one."

Slocum's eyes flickered with suspicion. "How do you figure?"

"Brains always outsmart brawn."

"If I had a busted leg I wouldn't talk high, Randall. I'd wait till it healed."

"If you had a busted leg it wouldn't heal."

"How come?"

"Dogs don't heal, Slocum."

With a bellow of rage Slocum sprang forward. He brushed Bess from the bed as he would a pillow, and seized Mack by the shoulders. "Maybe you didn't get enough!" he yelled. Bess screamed as he dragged Mack from the bed.

Mack felt the waves of unconsciousness closing over him, but he fought them back wildly. A blanket of fire covered his left leg. He clamped his teeth to keep from screaming. At that moment Bess leaped at Slocum, her nails tearing into his eyes and across his face. Mack fell as Slocum released him to protect his face from the ripping nails.

"Now you can have some too!" Slocum hissed, turning on Bess.

Her eyes widened with terror as he advanced on her. She stepped back slowly.

Unable to move, Mack watched from the floor, his body soaked in sweat. Without losing his smile, Slocum began to slap Bess' face, softly at first—back and forth, back and forth. The sound was like a

paddle slapping water. Then it increased. Bess seemed paralyzed. Her hair flew and her face reddened at each blow. Then she tried to dodge, and as she moved, she caught a glimpse of Mack, who was inching painfully across the floor toward the shotgun.

Suddenly Slocum saw Mack from the corner of his eye and swung around on him with a muttered curse.

Mack's fingers were within inches of the shotgun. He tried to reach it before the other could get to him, but his leg was like a dragging anchor. With another curse Slocum brought his boot down heavily on Mack's hand. Mack gasped and drew his hand closer to his body. Then Slocum took the shotgun and heaved it through the window.

"Now," he snarled, standing over Mack, "I'm done with playin'. You pay-in'?"

"Move on, Slocum," Mack whispered. "You're not getting a dime!"

Slocum reached down for Mack. Bess gave a little scream and Mack's jaw tightened. But then Slocum stopped. "No," he said, "there's better ways." He turned and was gone, and in a moment Mack heard the sound of horses down the road, growing fainter.

"Mack," Bess cried. "I'll get the rig and go for the Marshal and the doctor."

"No. No time. Just help me into bed." With his good leg, and her help, he struggled back into bed, where he lay sweating and panting with the pain. "He'll be back after dark." A spasm of faintness passed over him. He breathed deeply until it had gone. "We've got one chance of getting him. You'll have to do it all yourself. Game?"

She nodded.

"All right. Now listen. First, get all the cows into the barn. Then, in the loft, you'll find. . ."

It was full evening when Bess returned to Mack's bedside. Before entering the

house she carefully cleaned her shoes with a rag.

"Have enough?" Mack asked as she came in.

"Just made it." She sat on the bed and he put his arm around her. "Mack, do you think this will get him?"

"I don't know. He may not come himself, or if he does, he may be slicker than I think."

"Maybe you should have used a bear trap," she said. She smiled and her eyes closed as he drew her to him and kissed her.

A long while later he released her. "How long does a leg take to heal?"

"Long enough," she answered, her voice soft. "And it'll take longer if you don't behave."

He sobered suddenly. "We'd better set up watch. Put out the light and sit by the window with the twelve gauge. Make sure it's loaded. And keep some extra shells near you for reloading. If you see anything you shouldn't, let go both barrels. And give me the Colt."

SHE nodded, handed him his gun, and turned out the light. He saw her, in silhouette, take her place by the window. He couldn't see her face, but he knew as if a light were playing on her, that her lower lip would be set like that of a little boy trying to be tough. Yet he knew it wasn't play-acting. She had guts. Today she had stood up to Slocum, knowing that the polecat was capable of anything. There had been something in her eyes then, but it hadn't been fear. He smiled in the darkness.

Beyond Bess' form he could just make out, through the window, the hazy bulk of his barn against the night sky. There were few sounds. Even the insects and frogs seemed to be waiting. In a short time the stillness became a positive, pounding noise, eating into his nerves. His eyes ached from trying to pierce the

darkness. Once a slight wind swept past the house, making a lonely sound, but it was gone and the silence closed in again. He began to imagine things stirring.

Then he tensed. A shadow detached itself from the barn and ran on soundless feet toward the house. He was about to cry out to Bess when he blinked and the shadow vanished.

He relaxed and laughed. "I'm seeing things, Bess."

There was no answer. Then he saw her head nodding and he smiled. He'd let her sleep and keep watch from where he was. If he saw anything, he could call and wake her. He began to see things again, and he shut his eyes occasionally to clear them. He found it good to keep them closed for several seconds at a time. His leg throbbed and he tried to forget it. Poor Bess. The excitement had worn her down. Can't blame her for . . . getting a little . . . sleep. . . .

He jerked awake suddenly with a sensation of cold horror. A blinding, shifting brightness lit up the room. From the barn came the sharp crackle of flames, and a high animal scream.

"The Holsteins!" he cried. At the same moment Bess sprang up, threw the rifle to her shoulder, and fired twice.

"Get him?" He sat up, disregarding the pain that slashed his leg.

"No!" Bess sobbed. "I missed! I missed!" She dropped the shotgun and covered her face with her hands. "It's my fault. I fell asleep! Oh, Mack!"

"Never mind that. Were you able to see him? Was it Slocum?" His eyes were fastened on the blazing timbers of his barn. He tried to shut his ears against the sound of animals screaming in terror.

"I saw somebody. I'm pretty sure it was Slocum."

"All right. Help me out of bed."

"Mack! You can't—"

"Quick! Get me out to the rig. Lucky we didn't put the mare in the barn. She'd

be gone too." He pulled Bess' robe on, then paused at a dull thud. With a clutch at his throat he looked through the window and saw a great head butt its way through the barn wall, and a dark figure emerge. He watched without breathing, waiting. After a while he turned away. No other cows had come out.

He almost passed out twice on his way to the rig, but he was careful not to let Bess notice. She went slowly, her arm around his waist, her shoulder supporting most of his weight. When they reached the rig, he was running sweat. It had soaked through the robe and left a dark stain along Bess' side. He paused to clear his head before climbing in.

"Mack, I could go myself."

"No," he whispered through his teeth. "I wouldn't miss this for gold."

As the rig clattered down the road, he looked back at the barn. The blaze, in the dry timbers, had almost spent itself. Only the corner posts remained, charred and swaying. Slowly he turned away. "If we muffed it, Bess," he said softly, "we're licked."

She said nothing. Her eyes were on the road as she drove, and he knew she was holding back the tears.

They found Waters still at his office. He heard Mack's brief report of the fire, then climbed into the rig with them, skeptical but willing.

"We'll find him at the library, getting knowledge out of a bottle," Waters said.

Bess reined in before a dingy saloon. She and Waters helped Mack down and led him inside. A wave of smoke slapped at them, and when their eyes grew accustomed to it, they saw Slocum, with Harry and the other man, seated at a table near the wall.

There were few men in the room, but those few quieted as the strange trio paused at the door. They stared at the sweating, white-faced man, dressed in a woman's robe. Slocum looked up, and

Mack saw him go pale beneath the stubble. Mack's eyes went over him carefully.

"All right, Waters," he said finally. "Take him in."

Waters hesitated. "You sure? I'm not making any false arrest."

"I said take him in." Mack's face twisted into a grin of triumph.

Slocum stood up and smiled engagingly at Waters. "What's itchin' him, Marshal?"

"Big itch, Slocum," said Mack, "and I'm scratching to my heart's content." Then his face hardened. "I'm charging you with firing my barn!"

"Yeah?" Slocum's smile widened. "You prove it an' I'll admit it. I been here with the boys all night."

Harry and the other man nodded.

"Marshal," Mack said, "is there any blue mud in these parts?"

"Blue mud?"

"Is there?" Mack's eyes didn't move from Slocum's face.

"No."

"Well, two hours before the fire, my wife poured blue paint all around my barn so that anybody going near it would get it on his boots. Take a look at Slocum's."

Slocum glanced down at his own boots. There was a film of blue around the edge of the soles. As he looked up again, he made a quick motion, but Waters' gun flipped out and covered him and his men.

"That's all, Slocum," Waters said. "You croaked about evidence once too often."

He was almost out of the door with Slocum and his two men when Mack called to him. "Don't forget that reward, Waters. I have to build a new barn and replace my stock."

Then he turned to Bess and leaned a little closer to her than even his bum leg warranted. "Think you could find a way of spending a couple of hundred on yourself, Bess?" he asked.

BLOOD CALL

By PHILIP KETCHUM

ONE night in the Unitah saloon in Modoc Falls, two men had a bitter and bloody fight. When it was over, the one who was still on his feet stumbled outside. He made his way to the livery stable, where he washed up in the watering trough. After that he reclaimed his horse and mounted it and rode out of town. He said that he was heading back to his ranch. His name was Barney Hawes.

The other man, Dan Marsh, left town

*Death rode that crimson dawn,
calling Kerrigan to a final gun-
down—to trade his life and his
last bullet . . . for the life of a
man he hated!*



There was a third man to be
accounted for. . . .

within half an hour. He told no one where he was going. He was still angry, still bitter. He rode north, in the same direction as Barney Hawes, although he worked on a ranch west of Modoc Falls. There were men who noticed that and wondered about it.

Three days later the body of Barney Hawes was found in a clump of trees bordering on Crater creek at a point about twenty miles from town. He had been shot through the back. His money belt was missing. In it, he had carried more than a thousand dollars which he had received for the sale of some cattle. The trouble between Barney Hawes and Dan Marsh had been over money.

Will Cromwell, the sheriff, rode out to the Sawtooth ranch to see Dan Marsh. He found Barney Hawes' money belt hidden under Dan's bunk. It was a money belt made in a new style, one which a provident man would not want to throw away. The sheriff arrested Dan Marsh in spite of his claims of innocence and brought him back to Modoc Falls, where he lodged him in jail.

Kerrigan heard the story when he rode over to the Lindholm ranch, the day after Dan's arrest. He heard it from Carl Lindholm shortly after he arrived and while the two men stood at the corral fence.

"I can't believe Dan Marsh would shoot a man in the back," said Lindholm. "Neither can Ellen. She's pretty much upset over what happened."

Kerrigan frowned. He couldn't help but wonder if Ellen would be upset if he were in the same fix as Dan Marsh. Ellen was Carl Lindholm's daughter. She was the real reason Kerrigan had been riding over here lately, although he had found other excuses for his visits.

Kerrigan was twenty-seven. He was tall, slender, wiry, generally a quiet man, not easily excited, slow in the formation of an opinion. He had a ranch in the

Sentinel park country, a dozen miles beyond the Lindholm ranch. When he had settled there four years before, hardly anyone had thought he could make ends meet. The country was too wild. There were too many draws up which cattle could wander and get lost. People had given Kerrigan a year to tire of the endless work and quit. He was still there.

"It doesn't seem likely that Dan would have kept the money belt if he were guilty," said Kerrigan.

"That's what I told the sheriff," said Lindholm. "He only shrugged his shoulders. He said that under the circumstances, he had to place Dan under arrest. He didn't sound happy about it. He likes Dan. Most people do."

Kerrigan was still frowning. He wished this hadn't happened. It clouded the issue between him and Dan Marsh so far as Ellen was concerned. Dan Marsh had been the man he ran into most often when he came over here to see Ellen. Dan Marsh was the man he was most afraid of when he thought of Ellen and his plans for the future. Dan was just about his age, but he seemed much younger. There was a sparkle to his conversation which Kerrigan couldn't match and a streak of humor which nothing could smother.

"When did you see the sheriff?" Kerrigan asked.

"This morning. He stopped here on his way to Jasper. He'll be gone a couple days. He said there was no talk of trouble in town. Barney Hawes wasn't very popular. He was as tightfisted as they come. He probably owed Dan the money they fought over."

Kerrigan nodded, feeling that this might be true. He had known Hawes and hadn't liked him.

The two men walked up to the ranch house, and as they neared it Ellen Lindholm came out on the porch. Her welcoming smile showed the strain she was

feeling. She was slender, tall. There was a level, direct look in her eyes. She said, "Hello, Kerry," and her voice was as warm and friendly as it had always been.

"I just dropped by for a minute," said Kerrigan. "I'm really on my way to town."

This wasn't true, or at least it hadn't been true when he rode up. Kerrigan went to Modoc Falls no more often than was necessary. He didn't have the time for the long ride.

"I'm glad you came this way," said Ellen. "Did father tell you about Dan?"

"He told me," Kerrigan admitted.

"Dan didn't kill Barney Hawes," said Ellen, and there was a stubborn note in her voice. "Dan wouldn't shoot a man in the back."

"I know he wouldn't," said Kerrigan.

"Plenty of men knew that Barney Hawes had that money with him when he rode away from town," Ellen continued. "Someone else could have followed him, someone besides Dan. Someone else shot him and took his money belt and hid it under Dan's bunk. That's what really happened, Kerry."

"Have you talked to him?" Kerrigan asked.

"We rode in this morning," said Lindholm, "after the sheriff was here. Ellen talked to him."

"What did he say, Ellen?"

"He told me he followed Barney Hawes from town but that after a mile or so as he turned west and rode to the ranch. There's no way he can prove it, of course. No one saw him turn west. There was a rain the next day which blotted out the trail of his horse."

In Ellen's eyes, Kerrigan could read the hopeless despair which gripped the girl, the heartbreak which had overwhelmed her. His lips tightened and he looked away. What could he say to her? He tried to find words of encouragement which would not sound empty, but there

were no such words. He could say that things would work out all right, that the man who had killed Barney Hawes would be found, but he was afraid there was little chance of it.

"I'll see him when I get to town," he promised. "Maybe we can figure something out."

Ellen shook her head, as though she had measured every possibility and had found no hope anywhere. Kerrigan was afraid she was going to start crying. "It's quite a ride to town and then back to my place," he said abruptly. "I'd better get started."

IT WAS dark by the time he reached Modoc Falls. He stopped first at the livery stable, where Crusty Blake took charge of his horse and told him about the fight between Dan Marsh and Barney Hawes and about what had finally happened. He had his evening meal at the Modoc restaurant, and heard the story again from three men who sat at his table, and from Sue Billings who waited on him and who was her usual chatty self. Sue knew everyone in the valley and all the gossip and made the Modoc restaurant a popular place. She was short, freckled, and had straw-colored hair and was always friendly.

"You haven't been in for a long time," she said to Kerrigan as he paid for his meal. "What keeps you back there in the hills?"

"Work," Kerrigan grinned. "Lots of it. But I get around some, too."

"Not to Modoc Falls."

"Not often," Kerrigan agreed. "I came in this time to see the sheriff. It seems he's not here."

"He's gone to Jasper. He'll be back in a couple of days."

"Will you see him when he gets back?"

"He eats here. Sure I'll see him."

"How about giving him a message from me?" Kerrigan asked.

"Sure. What message?"

"Tell him I'd like to see him," said Kerrigan, lowering his voice. "It's important. I was near Crater creek the night Barney Hawes was killed. I saw something I want to tell him about."

Sue's eyes widened. She caught her breath. "What did you see?"

"I'd better not tell you that," said Kerrigan, "but there's one thing you can count on. They will never hang Dan Marsh for the murder of Barney Hawes."

"Who was it?" Sue asked, leaning forward.

Kerrigan chuckled. He shook his head. "You just deliver my message to the sheriff, Sue. We'll let him handle things. That's what sheriffs are for."

He left the restaurant after that and a few minutes later dropped in at the Unitah saloon. In the saloon were several men he knew. He mentioned to them, casually, that he had come in to see the sheriff. He didn't say why. An hour later he left town, heading back toward the Sentinel park country. He was pretty sure that before another day had passed half the people in the valley would know why he wanted to see the sheriff. Sue could never keep the story to herself. She would pass it on to everyone who came to the restaurant. She had new information on the murder of Barney Hawes, a new slant which made a mystery of it. She would add to his story, build it up, make it more dramatic. She would probably have him witnessing the murder. And somewhere in town, or out on the range, the man who had killed Barney Hawes would hear what she had said. He would hear the story and know that he had to act, and act fast.

The three men left Modoc Falls the next morning. One of them rode north. He said he was going to Sage City to visit his brother. His name was Sim Otway. No one had known that he had

a brother up in Sage City. He didn't.

The second man rode east. His name was Lou Parrish. He said he had received a letter offering him a job on a ranch near Colma, several hundred miles away. He wasn't sure he would take it, but he wanted to look it over. Parrish had been around Modoc Falls for almost two years. He had worked on half a dozen ranches. He was an indifferent worker. No one was sorry to see him leave.

The third man rode west. He was going to try his hand at wild horse hunting in the Snobogan hills. He explained that he would outfit at Hillary. His name was Ed Tenney and he had often boasted of the wild horses he had trapped. He had also said he would never waste his time that way again, or at least not until the market improved.

In spite of the directions these men took, they met that night at the point where Crater Creek empties into the Squirrel river. This was fifteen miles almost due south of Crater Falls. When Parrish got there the other two had already arrived and had a fire started and food was ready.

"We're going to a lot of trouble about this," growled Sim Otway. "No one saw us that night. The place where we caught up with Barney Hawes is twenty miles from Sentinel park. What would Kerrigan have been doing there?"

"How do I know?" snapped Lou Parrish. "Maybe he couldn't sleep. Maybe he was just out for a ride."

"Or maybe he was home in bed," said Tenney.

"Do you want to take a chance on it?" Parrish asked dryly. "Suppose he wasn't home in bed? Suppose he saw us near where we took care of Barney Hawes. Do either of you want to explain to the sheriff what we were doing there?"

"We could call him a liar," said Tenney.

"All right. Call him a liar, and then let Sim Otway try to explain why he went out to the Sawtooth ranch and asked for a job he knew he couldn't get because he had once been fired from the Sawtooth. And let him explain why he stuck around to play poker that night with the boys in the bunkhouse. Someone is sure to remember that he went over and sat down on Dan Marsh's bunk."

"No one saw me do that," barked Otway.

"But let the sheriff tie you in with the murder of Barney Hawes, and the mere fact that you went out to the Sawtooth is enough. The sheriff can figure that you planted the money belt."

"I still think Kerrigan's bluffing," Otway insisted.

"Maybe. But if he is, he's going to regret it."

Parrish had his meal, eating hurriedly and washing it down with hot coffee. He was older than the other two men. He was their unelected leader. He was thin, stooped, undersized. He was fundamentally lazy. He liked doing this no better than Otway or Tenney, but he knew it had to be done. He didn't want to have to leave Modoc Falls. He had other irons in the fire.

"What do we do with Kerrigan?" asked Ed Tenney.

"Not what we did with Barney Hawes," said Parrish slowly. "We leave no body around to be found. That Sentinel park country is rugged. A man could get lost in it as well as cattle. A man could disappear. Kerrigan's all alone. There are three of us. We'll have no trouble."

There was more talk, but not much more. The three men broke camp and mounted their horses. They rode now, due west, toward Sentinel park. A long ride lay ahead, but they could make it easily by dawn.

KERRIGAN'S cabin was built on the north edge of a wide meadow, close against the dwarf pine and scrub oak which covered most of these rolling hills at the foot of Sentinel park. A mountain stream which cut across the meadow passed near his cabin, then plunged down a narrow gully and a mile beyond added its waters to the waters of Crater creek. The road from Modoc Falls, the last five miles of which Kerrigan had built himself, reached the meadow south of the cabin and the creek. Parts of the road were pretty bad, and impassable in wet weather.

Kerrigan was expecting a visitor, but how his visitor would come he didn't know. He doubted that the man would follow the road. It was much more likely, Kerrigan felt, that the man would choose his own route and twist in through the hills. There was no way to anticipate the point at which his visitor would reach the meadow. The area to be watched was too wide. And though it was likely that he might, the man didn't necessarily have to approach the cabin. He could take any one of a hundred stations somewhere in the trees fringing on the meadow. He could wait for an easy shot at the man he had come to kill.

That was what Kerrigan had invited. He had gone to Modoc Falls, and had said, in effect, "I know that man who murdered Barney Hawes. Send the sheriff to me and I will name him." He was sure the guilty man would hear what he had said, for the man would be listening to every rumor. The man would be on edge until Dan Marsh had been hung and the case closed.

All this, of course, was based on the presumption that Dan Marsh was innocent. He could be wrong about that, Kerrigan knew, but if he was wrong, no harm would have been done. No one would come after him.

On this, the night after his return from Modoc Falls, Kerrigan didn't sleep in the cabin. He made his camp back in the trees, away from it but still close enough to see it when it grew light and at a point where he was near the road. He took food with him, and a canteen of water, and his rifle and six-gun. He had no definite plan other than to see his visitor before his visitor saw him. What would happen then, he didn't know. The man who came might have some logical excuse for his trip. There might be only talk—or there might be shooting. Kerrigan scowled as he considered these possibilities. This course which he was following had seemed good when he had worked it out on his way into Modoc Falls. Since then, he had been able to measure its imperfections. While a man's visit here might be an indication of his guilt, it was really nothing more. It was not proof. If there was shooting and the man was killed, this still wasn't proof. And the shooting might end another way.

Kerrigan slept restlessly that night. He woke up several times, but only to hear the usual sounds, the whisper of the wind through the trees, the chirping of the night birds, the ripple of the stream as it dipped into the gully on the way to Crater creek. He woke up finally near dawn, and this time it was different. This time his muscles were tense with the anticipation of danger and his every sense was alert. He sat up. The stars had faded in the sky and the crests of the mountains to the east were clearly outlined against the lifting brightness of a new day. The wind had died out. The night birds still twittered and the sounds of the creek could still be heard. But there had been other sounds, foreign sounds, the sounds of horses and the creaking of saddle leather. These sounds had awakened him and were still faintly in his memory.

He stared toward the cabin and the

larger shadow of the barn, which wasn't really a barn but more accurately might have been called a shed. At first he could see nothing, then, as his eyes continued to probe the thinning darkness he made out a moving figure near the corner of the shed. A second figure joined it, then a third.

Kerrigan was now on his knees, motionless. There was other movement in the shadows, but this movement came from the horses. No other men joined the three who now stood grouped at the shed corner. Kerrigan stared at them. He couldn't make out who they were, but he could be sure of one thing. Honest men didn't make a call in this manner, coming up behind a man's shed in the early dawn, gathering for a conference while still in its shadows. He could reasonably be sure of something else. This was what he had invited through what he had said in Modoc Falls. But he had expected only one man, not three. He had expected the odds to be more even.

The three men moved back from the corner of the building and, safely hidden from the house, sat down on the ground. They rolled and lit cigarettes. Kerrigan could see the brief flare of matches in their cupped hands. The sky was constantly growing lighter, and after a time one of the men got to his feet and moved to the far corner of the shed. He carried his rifle with him. The other two men came to the near corner. They also had their rifles and they sank to the ground, watching the cabin.

Kerrigan sucked in a long, slow breath. He knew exactly what was supposed to happen. He was supposed to be in the house, asleep. He was supposed to wake up at about this time. He was supposed to start his fire, then step outside to wash up or to bring in water for coffee. These three men covered the door with their rifles. They would have given no warning when he stepped out. He

wouldn't have had the slightest chance.

A cold chill ran over his body, but was driven away by a mounting anger. He fingered his rifle, then made a brief examination of his six-gun. After this he moved cautiously to the left, so that he was almost behind a heavy screen of shrubbery. Behind him not more than three yards, the ground dropped away several feet in one of its many irregularities. He could find good protection there when he needed it, and he could move safely either to his right or left, or down the hill and away from the meadow. All this was vaguely in his mind as he considered what to do and waited for the light to grow stronger.

The three men grew restless. One of the two at the near corner of the shed backed out of sight of the cabin, stood up, rolled a cigarette, lit it, and then inspected his rifle. There was enough light, now, so that Kerrigan could recognize him as Sim Otway. After a time, Otway again took his place at the corner of the shed. Kerrigan thought the man with Otway was Ed Tenney, but he wasn't sure. He had no idea who the third man was. Otway and Tenney he knew slightly from occasional contacts with them in Modoc Falls. Neither, he judged, was overly fond of work. Either could have used a share of the money taken from Barney Hawes. Kerrigan scowled. He remembered how Barney Hawes had been shot and he lifted his rifle.

"Hey!" he called sharply, "are you looking for someone?"

THE man at the far corner of the shed scrambled around it, out of sight. Tenney jerked to his feet. He took one look over his shoulder in the general direction of Kerrigan's, then started running, running in a crazy zig-zag. Kerrigan followed him with his rifle. He fired, aiming for Tenney's legs

and he heard Tenney scream and saw him spill to the ground.

Otway had crawled swiftly to the front of the shed and from the front corner was firing at him. A bullet sang through the air, inches above Kerrigan's head. This was followed by another, slightly to the left of where Kerrigan was lying, then by one to the right.

Kerrigan levered another shell into his rifle. He drove a bullet at the front corner of the shed, but even as he fired, Otway stepped out of sight. From the far corner of the shed the third man fired at him, but aimed too high. Kerrigan scrambled backwards and over the protecting ridge of ground. He moved to the left, to where he could see into the yard between the shed and the cabin, but when he took a look, Otway and the third man weren't in sight. Where they had gone, Kerrigan didn't know. Perhaps into the shed, perhaps around the cabin, perhaps even into the shelter of the trees in which he was hiding.

Tenney was still on the ground. He was dragging himself toward the open doorway of the shed. Apparently he couldn't walk. Kerrigan watched him bleakly. He thought again of how Barney Hawes had been shot and of how Tenney, with the two other men, had hugged the ground a few minutes before, watching his cabin door, waiting for him to appear. His lips tightened and he lifted his rifle and sent a shot burning through the air, well above Tenney's head.

Tenney fell flat. He lay motionless.

Kerrigan fired again, closer this time to Tenney's head. He waited for a moment then fired once more, skimming his bullet as close to the man as he could without hitting him. Tenney screamed this time. He started scrambling forward again and there was a terrible urgency in the movement of his arms and body. Kerrigan smashed a bullet into the ground just ahead of the man and Tenney stopped

his crawling and once more lay still.

He was sweating. There was no question of that. Kerrigan watched him grimly. He wondered what had happened to the other men. There had been no shots from them, no sign that they were still around. Kerrigan reloaded the chamber of his rifle. He waited until Tenney again started moving toward the shed, then again drove a shot into the ground just ahead of him, and stopped him.

It was fully light now. The bright warning of the sun glistened from the top range of the mountains. There were no clouds in the sky. The day would be warm. Kerrigan's eyes had been constantly searching the yard and watching the corners of the cabin and shed. If the other two men were still here he felt they would have answered his shots at Tenney. Since they hadn't, his best guess was that they had moved past the cabin and into the trees. Having done this, they might either keep on walking away from Sentinel park or circle around and try to come up at him from behind.

This, of course, was what they would try. It was too long a walk away from here. They had left their horses behind, horses which could identify them. They were two to one, the odds in their favor. They had come here to get him and wouldn't leave without another try.

Kerrigan moved back to near where he had been when the men arrived. He rolled and lit a cigarette and smoked it hurriedly, listening to the faint sounds all around him and picturing in his mind the terrain back of the cabin and the ground the men would have to cover in their circle. He finished his cigarette regretfully, knowing it was the last he could smoke for a long while, or perhaps the last he would ever smoke. After this, he reached for his canteen of water, then moved once more, edging cautiously forward toward the back of the cabin. At a place where the ground protected

him on the cabin side and a screen of shrubbery hid him, he stopped and waited.

The sun had topped the mountains and had started its climb into the sky. It grew warmer. Kerrigan lay where he was without moving. He heard faint sounds down the hill, sounds such as might have been made by the crackling of dead twigs under the weight of a man's body. After a time he heard the sounds again, closer this time and a little behind him. He stared through the screen of shrubbery but could see only other shrubbery and tree trunks, and here and there bare spaces of ground. As the minutes passed he was aware of the tension building up in his body, of the perspiration which soaked him.

Somewhere down that hill were two men. They were moving even closer. They were here to kill him and he had asked for it. He planned it this way. He hadn't planned on such odds, but that wasn't the point. He had stepped into this thing with his eyes open, and if there was no way out, he had no one to blame but himself.

He again heard a faint and alien sound. It seemed close, terribly close. He peered through the thick shrubbery behind which he was hidden. He caught a momentary glimpse of Sim Otway, of his head and shoulders as they ducked out of sight. He waited. There was another man besides Otway, another to be accounted for. From behind him, from the direction of the shed, a horse thundered away, perhaps running free, perhaps mounted. He couldn't be sure and he didn't dare raise up and look. He was staring at the point where he had seen Otway, and now he saw him again, edging to the left.

Kerrigan leveled his six-gun. He took a quick shot at the man. A hoarse cry broke from Otway's lips and he dropped to the ground, sliding a little down the hill. For a moment he lay motionless, then his gun lifted and a bullet screamed

at Kerrigan, burning across his shoulder. Otway fired again, but too high. He came to his knees. He screamed, "Lou—Lou! We've got him! We've—"

Kerrigan steadied his gun and squeezed the trigger. He saw Otway's body jerk and sag forward and settle to the ground, and he glanced quickly from side to side. There was a third man still to be accounted for, a third man to whom Otway had called in what he thought was his moment of victory. That meant that the third man was nearby, although Kerrigan hadn't heard him.

Nearby, but where? Kerrigan couldn't stay where he was, but he didn't dare to move. He lay rigid, watching, listening, almost holding his breath. A shadow fell across the open space in front of him. He had been watching downhill. He had been watching downhill for both men, but only one had been downhill. The other had remained hidden near the cabin and had waited for Otway to smoke him out.

KERRIGAN rolled over, lifting his gun. He saw Lou Parrish standing almost above him, a tight, ugly sneer on his face. The gun Parrish was holding was pointed down at him. He heard the roar of its explosion and felt a smashing pain in his head. It was a pain which engulfed him, blotting out everything else. He didn't even know that he had fired the gun he had swung toward Parrish.

It was well into the afternoon when Kerrigan fought his way back to consciousness. His head seemed to be split open, but when he fingered the wound he knew that the bullet Parrish had fired had only creased his skull. Blood was caked on the side of his head and face and a hammering ache in his skull made him dizzy.

After a time he sat up and he saw,

then, the body of Lou Parrish, so close to him he could almost touch it. Parrish was lying face down, half over the ridge of ground behind which Kerrigan had hidden. His face was turned toward Kerrigan. Just above his left eye was a bullet hole. Not much blood had come from it, but it was sure Lou Parrish wouldn't wake up again.

Kerrigan finally got to his feet. He crossed the yard and walked to the creek and had a deep drink of its clear, cool water. He was still sitting there when Will Cromwell, the sheriff, rode up, accompanied by half a dozen men from Modoc Falls. Two of the men helped him to his cabin. One of them, Doc Evans, washed and dressed his wound, muttering all the time he worked about how lucky Kerrigan was, and what a fool he had been. Kerrigan didn't have to be told that.

"One man got away," said Kerrigan. "It was Ed Tenney."

"He didn't get far," said the doctor. "He spilled off his horse and couldn't get back up again. We found him and Cromwell made him talk. According to what Tenney said, it was Parrish who killed Barney Hawes. Tenney says he and Sim Otway were just along for the ride. He also told us that they hadn't meant to harm you. Just tried to frighten you."

Kerrigan had his own opinion of that.

"What I can't figure out," said Doc Evans, "is why you had to blab all you knew in Modoc Falls. You might have guessed the men you had seen kill Barney Hawes would hear about it and come after you. It was a dumb thing to do, Kerrigan, and you don't look dumb to me."

Kerrigan shrugged and let that pass. "When will Dan be released?" he wanted to know.

"As soon as we get back to town, I reckon," said Doc Evans.

When you didn't want to think about things, what you did was work. Work hard. Work until you were too tired each night to think, and too tired in the morning. Kerrigan learned that long ago and he used this knowledge now, trying not to remember Ellen Lindholm, or the look in her eyes when she had mentioned Dan Marsh, or the soft, worried sound of her voice.

The days slipped by one after another, until ten were gone, and then one afternoon as he was repairing a fence at one of the canyons, Dan Marsh rode up. He was looking well. He looked as though he had never seen the inside of a jail, as though he had never in his life been really tired, as though nothing had ever bothered him.

"I've been thinking," said Dan, "that I owed you something. I don't know how to pay up."

Kerrigan shook his head. "You don't owe me a thing."

"Nothing but my life," said Dan.

"Forget it," said Kerrigan. "I saw three men near where Barney Hawes was murdered, and I couldn't see you hang for them. As it happened—"

"As it happened," said Dan Marsh, "you didn't see three men. I'd hate to sit in a cutthroat poker game with you, Kerry. I'd lose my shirt. I'm not worth what you did, but thanks anyhow. What's been keeping you glued so close to home?"

"Work, Dan."

"It's not worth it."

"Sometimes it is."

"It's not worth it," said Dan, "when a certain girl I know spends every evening listening for the sound of your horse."

Kerrigan pulled in a long, slow breath. He suddenly felt shaky. He stared up at Dan, wondering whether to believe him or not, wanting to believe him but afraid to.

Dan Marsh was grinning at him. Dan seemed to be enjoying himself immensely.

"If I could work it," said Dan Marsh honestly, "you wouldn't have a chance with Ellen, in spite of what I owe you. But it's no use. She likes me. She probably even worried about me when I was in jail, but not the way she's worrying about you now. Shucks, man. Climb your horse and ride. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing, now," said Kerrigan. "Nothing in the world." He threw down his heavy fence pliers.

His grin was a match for Dan's. He forgot the fence he had been working on. He turned and climbed his horse and started away, then reined up and looked back.

"Come on, Dan," he invited.

But Dan Marsh only shook his head and waved.

FIRST AID for **HEADACHES**



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Or cloud your Easter day,
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TALES of the

by LEE

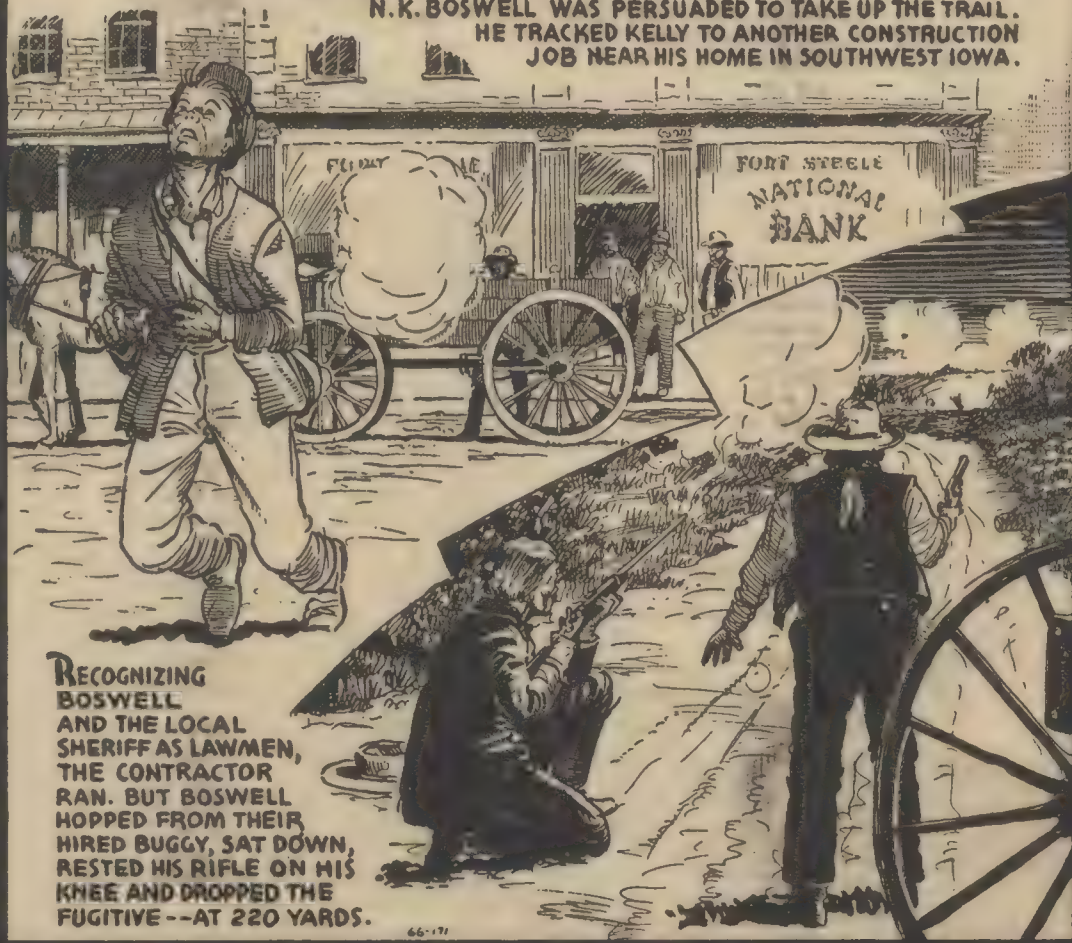
SHERIFF BOSWELL'S CHASE

THE LUSTY TRACKMEN WHO PUSHED THE TWIN RIBBONS OF STEEL ACROSS THE PLAINS TO PUT A FINAL BINDER ON THE OLD WILD WEST WERE GOOD MEN--AND BAD. JOHN KELLY, CONTRACTOR OF A CONSTRUCTION GANG IN WYOMING IN '68, WAS BAD.

WHEN YOUNG CHARLEY MAXWELL QUIT THE JOB, THE RASCALLY CONTRACTOR HELD OUT A BIG CHUNK OF HIS PAY. THE KID PROTESTED, IN FRONT OF KELLY'S FRIENDS, IN THE BANK AT FORT STEELE. OUT ON THE STREET, THE ENRAGED CONTRACTOR RESTED HIS RIFLE ON A WAGONBOX AND SHOT CHARLEY DOWN, THEN JAMMED THE MUZZLE AGAINST CHARLIE'S EAR AND COLDBLOODEDLY FINISHED HIM.



IN SPITE OF THE KILLER'S WEALTH AND INFLUENCE, DEPUTY SHERIFF N. K. BOSWELL WAS PERSUADED TO TAKE UP THE TRAIL. HE TRACKED KELLY TO ANOTHER CONSTRUCTION JOB NEAR HIS HOME IN SOUTHWEST IOWA.



RECOGNIZING BOSWELL AND THE LOCAL SHERIFF AS LAWMEN, THE CONTRACTOR RAN. BUT BOSWELL HOPPED FROM THEIR HIRED BUGGY, SAT DOWN, RESTED HIS RIFLE ON HIS KNEE AND DROPPED THE FUGITIVE--AT 220 YARDS.

66-171

"OLD WEST"



HOLDING OFF KELLY'S BROTHER AND A MOB OF INFURIATED TRACKHANDS, THE OFFICERS LOADED THE WOUNDED MAN INTO THE BUGGY AND WHIPPED UP THE HORSES. BEYOND RED OAK, THE MOB, MOUNTED ON WORK ANIMALS, CAUGHT UP WITH THEM. THEY ESCAPED BY THREATENING TO SHOOT THEIR PRISONER.

KELLY'S BROTHER SPURRED AHEAD AND HAD ANOTHER MOB WAITING AT JUNCTION CITY. BOSWELL FIRED OVER THEIR HEADS, SCATTERING THEM, AND PLUGGED KELLY'S BROTHER WHEN HE WENT FOR HIS GUN. OTHERS HAD TO BE BEATEN OFF AS THE TRAIN, A FREIGHT, GOT UNDER WAY.

IN THE COUNCIL BLUFFS JAIL, BOSWELL SLEPT IN KELLY'S CELL, FORTUNATELY, FOR HE CAUGHT KELLY'S FRIENDS BATTERING AT THE DOOR. THEN A \$40,000 BRIBE WAS OFFERED HIM, AND HE SPIRITED THE CONTRACTOR ACROSS THE RIVER TO OMAHA, WHERE THERE WAS ANOTHER RESCUE TRY.



FEARING THAT AN ATTEMPT MIGHT BE MADE TO WRECK HIS TRAIN, HE SENT A WORK CAR AHEAD. SURE ENOUGH, AN OBSTRUCTION CAPABLE OF DERAILING THE TRAIN WAS FOUND. THE REST OF THE JOURNEY — TO LARAMIE CITY WAS WITHOUT INCIDENT, AND SHERIFF BOSWELL'S GREAT CHASE WAS OVER.



KELLY NEVER CAME TO TRIAL, HOWEVER, DUE TO HIS INFLUENCE AND A SLY OUTLAY OF MONEY. BUT JUSTICE OF A SORT CAUGHT UP WITH HIM IN TEXAS, WHERE HE WAS SHOT DEAD IN A BRAWL.

RECORD



RODEO

By Joey Sasso

WE VALUE your opinions on these record sessions, fans, and we'd very much like to hear from you. Sound off, and you may be a prizewinner. For the best letter discussing the reviews in each issue, the writer will receive, absolutely free, one of the best new albums of Western music. The writers of the two next best letters will each find in the mail, with our compliments, one of the latest Western releases. Address your letters to Joey Sasso, care of this magazine, at 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

GATHER round, all you fans of Western music. If you're not an *aficionado* of the guitar and fiddle, you soon will be. The music of the plains and prairies has been coming back into style.

For our money, of course, it's never been out of style, since the songs of the American West have always been one of that great territory's outstanding contributions to the world, but lately record manufacturers have been waking up to the fact that the hoedown, the square dance and the guitar ballad have an eager audience all over the country. The result has been a tremendous boom in prairie pressings, which, just like the West, hasn't been still for a moment but has increased by leaps and bounds. We know that you readers of *Fifteen Western Tales* will want to keep up with all that's new and good in Western music, and so we've signed on Joey Sasso to ride herd on the turntables for you. Joey is a young man who's well qualified for the job, since he's spent several years as a top hand in Tin Pan Alley, interviewing and writing about many of the famous personalities of the world of Western music. Let's see what he has to say. Here's Joey now:

THE YODEL BLUES QUICKSILVER

ROSALIE ALLEN AND ELTON BRITT
WITH THE SKYTOPPERS
(RCA Victor)

The topside is the hit song from a current Broadway stage show, is given a striking interpretation by Rosalie Allen and Elton Britt, who combine yodeling and singing in their own inimitable manner. When both these champion yodelers pool their talents you really have something. There is an unusual treatment on one chorus, with one singing while the other yodels, and this platter should hit the top of the pile. On the backing, this talented duo delivers a new popular song which should win wide favor. They are in good form, singing to the accompaniment of the Skytoppers. All you Westerners Who Come east should lend An Ear To "Prairie Stars" With Rosalie Allen On Radio Station WOV.

I'VE GOT TEARS IN MY EARS
SHE MADE TOOTHPICKS OF THE
TIMBER OF MY HEART
HOMER AND JETHRO
(RCA Victor)

Homer and Jethro, that popular rustic

duo who have won fame singing hillbilly versions of current hits, now should fracture their fans with some uproarious country-style ditties which give them an unlimited opportunity to demonstrate their hayseed antics. The first is "I've Got Tears In My Ears". Need we say more? The flipover is a tender tale of love, told with the boy's most amusing dialect delivery and some humorous interpolations which give it a sensational rural flavor.

**ASK MY HEART
WALTZING MY BLUES AWAY**
DOLPH HEWITT
(RCA Victor)

Dolph Hewitt is the biggest new sensation in the country-music field. His first RCA Victor disc was an immediate hit and his second will score an even greater bullseye. Dolph strikes an appealing note with his rich and resonant tones, singing with a warmth and tenderness which comes over beautifully on wax. The string orchestra accompaniment nicely supplements his romantic warbling. The flip-over finds Dolph vocalizing in three-quarter time, and his voice is fresher than ever on this gay waltz, which has a lively and tuneful lilt. Dolph is a big Chicago radio hit now, and has one of the biggest fan followings in the Midwest.

**IT MAY BE TOO LATE
GOD PUT A RAINBOW IN THE
CLOUDS**
WESLEY TUTTLE
(Capitol)

The popular Wesley Tuttle blends his voice with equally popular Merle Travis on two great hill country songs. The first is a typical ballad and the reverse is one of the best of the sacred songs. Accompaniment is by The Coonhunters.

**CUDDLEBUG
I WANTS MY DIME BACK**
WADE RAY
(Capitol)

Wade Ray was the busiest man in the country when he made these sides. Not only does he sing, but he plays all the instruments himself. Wade, who hails from St. Louis, has two novelty hits for sure. You figure out how he did it.

**YOU'RE ONLY IN MY ARMS
I DON'T KNOW WHY I LOVE YOU**
JIMMY WAKELY
(Capitol)

Two sentimental Wakely solos with hit-caliber lyrics and catchy melody. Wakely is co-author and performance is rated high.

**NAPLES GIRL
WORRIED MIND**
REX TORIAN
(Capitol)

Initial recording of Rex Torian and his String Band. Earl Grace sings original composition. A popular group with a bright future. True hillbilly adaptation of an old standard. Rex takes vocal honors.

**I JUST DON'T LIKE THIS KIND
OF LIVIN'**
MAY YOU NEVER BE ALONE
HANK WILLIAMS
(M-G-M)

We have no doubt that this new record by Hank Williams is going to be one of his most successful to date. Both sides feature good tunes from Hank's own pen, and both naturally offer Hank's great voice. The contrast between tunes will find favor with Williams fans, too. The a lowdown collaboration in boogie style first side is a steady-moving, brash blues ballad, while the reverse takes the blues into the mournful, lamenting category. Sincerity and ease are the hallmarks here, with Hank sounding, incidentally, in even better voice than ever before. The final touch to these two sure-fire hits is added by Hank's Drifting Cowboys, who provide a good instrumental background complete with the excellent solos that we have come to expect from the Cowboys.

**GUITAR AND PIANO BOOGIE
I'M ONLY TELLING YOU**
ARTHUR (GUITAR BOOGIE) SMITH
AND HIS CRACKER-JACKS
(M-G-M)

The only thing we have to question in this grand new M-G-M platter by Arthur "Guitar Boogie" Smith and His Cracker-Jacks is the title. Don't get us wrong—the first side is an accurate description, by all means, but somehow it doesn't seem to go far enough. You see, in addition to

between Art's boogie-winged guitar and the Cracker-Jacks' piano, there's also a standout contribution from a Cracker-Jack accordion. Wish that mention could be made of that in the title too! But misnomer or not this is one of the best of Art's long string of boogie disks; a mighty fascinating, mighty warm bit of instrumentalizing. Say, what are we carping about? This side by any other name would sound just as terrific! The other side gives us another Smith original, but this time one with a wow of a humorous lyric. Art carries the vocal chorus off himself in his usual pleasant way, decorating the whole with some mean licks on his guitar. Open up the juke, this platter has it! Wouldn't be surprised if it swept the city as well as the country!

MEAN WOMAN WITH GREEN EYES SHE'S GONE

BOB WILLS AND HIS TEXAS PLAYBOYS
(M-G-M)

Here's a top notch platter by the old master, Bob Wills, that folk fans will find hard to resist! It couples two of the cutest numbers Bob has given us on wax, and if you don't get a kick out of them—well, brother, you just never will be able to enjoy yourself. The "A" side lets us in on the tale of a *Mean Woman With Green Eyes*. The story's real lowdown, and it's told in a tricky, scattish vocal by Jack Loyd, which stacks up nicely with the best of the vocals Jack has sent our way via Wills recordings. Bob's playboys provide Jack with a sagebrush jammer of a background, and Bob comes in along the line himself with some of his funniest comments to date.

Wills fans, who luckily have seen a personal appearance by The Playboys will need no introduction to *She's Gone*, the number on the reverse side. Bob and his bunch have been doing this one for years on a strictly request basis and the audience never fails to go wild. The first chorus of the tune seems a straight (albeit suspiciously weepy) introduction to an average blues song—the kind sung by a guy whose gal has up and left him. The hilarity breaks loose, though, when the Playboys start reading a letter the gal left

behind explaining her exit. Bob and his boys had fun recording this number, which has been a long-time favorite with them. Their enthusiasm is sure to infect you immediately! You're gonna have a high old time with this side.

"MY EMPTY HEART"

"I WISH I HAD STAYED OVER YONDER"

GENE AUTRY
(Columbia)

Here are two great ballads by the one and only Gene Autry. The topside has an appealing melody and Gene sings the lyrics with great feeling and sincerity. The reverse is a slightly faster tempo with a good, rhythmic beat. Gene is a co-writer of both songs.

"I MARRIED THE ROSE OF SAN ANTONE"

"MY LITTLE ROCK CANDY BABY"
BOB WILLS
(M-G-M)

Two sides of really top-drawer, folk-flavored swing of a type that only that old master could devise. The topside explains itself through its title: it's a sequel to the famous all-time Western hit, *THE ROSE OF SAN ANTONE*. It was written by Bob and Jack Loyd. Jack does a mighty nice job on the vocal. The Playboys get a chance to serve up a bit of sagebrush jivin' in that popular new jump style Bob has developed. Spotted along the instrumental byway are some fine solo bits by the boys, with a mighty nice lick on a rippling trumpet the most noteworthy. On the flip, we get a listen at another swingy tune with a western tang, also co-authored by Bob. This time the setting is Arkansas and the subject is *MY LITTLE ROCK CANDY BABY*. Jack Loyd tells us all about her, and his description makes for swell listening. The Playboys again contribute some good solos, with a piano bit and that trumpet from the other side almost stealing honors from those guitar flights for which the Playboys are famous. Bob's inimitable comments run through both sides, and on *BABY* they're hilarious.

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 125)

HOLA, amigo! Rein up and try your brains on the Western mind-teasers listed below. There are twenty questions in the set—all dealing with rangeland and cattle country subjects. Answer eighteen or more of them, and you're excellent. Answer sixteen or seventeen and you're good. But call the turn on fewer than fourteen and you're crowding into the Arizona nightingale class. Good luck, amigo!

1. True or false? A horse is said to "crawfish" when it pitches backward.

2. What is the meaning of the Western slang expression "haze the talk?"

3. What are two slang meanings for the cowpoke term "iron?"

4. If the ranch boss sent you out for a "knobhead," which of the following should you return with? A stupid cowpuncher? A mule? A rangeland school teacher?

5. If an outlaw were said to have left town with a "nine in his tail," would this mean he left in a hurried or leisurely fashion?

6. True or false? The call, "more straw," is one requesting that more calves be brought to the branding fire.

7. True or false? A "neck reiner" is a tenderfoot who roughly turns his horse by pressing the reins tightly against the animal's neck.

8. True or false? In some parts of the West, the well known chaparral cock is known as a "Paisano."

9. If the ranch boss sent you out for a "palomino," which of the following should you return with? A black horse? A black and white spotted horse? A "golden" colored horse with light mane and tail?

10. Which would be more likely to ride on a "postage stamp," a Westerner or an Easterner?

11. "Remudera" is the Mexican name for which of the following? A wrangler? The bell mare? A soldier?

12. If a cowpoke friend told you to meet him over in the "rincon," where would you meet him?

13. True or false? A running brand cannot be made with a running iron.

14. What is the meaning of the Western slang term, "scratching gravel?"

15. If you were sent to the "skookum house," in which of the following places would you be? In jail on an Indian reservation? In an Indian chiefs wigwam? In a Mexican gambling house?

16. True or false? In the language of the Westerner, a "sourdough" is a bachelor?

17. True or false? The Western slang term, "swing a wide loop," means to steal cattle.

18. True or false? According to the cowpoke's way of thinking, "turn-out time" refers to the winter time.

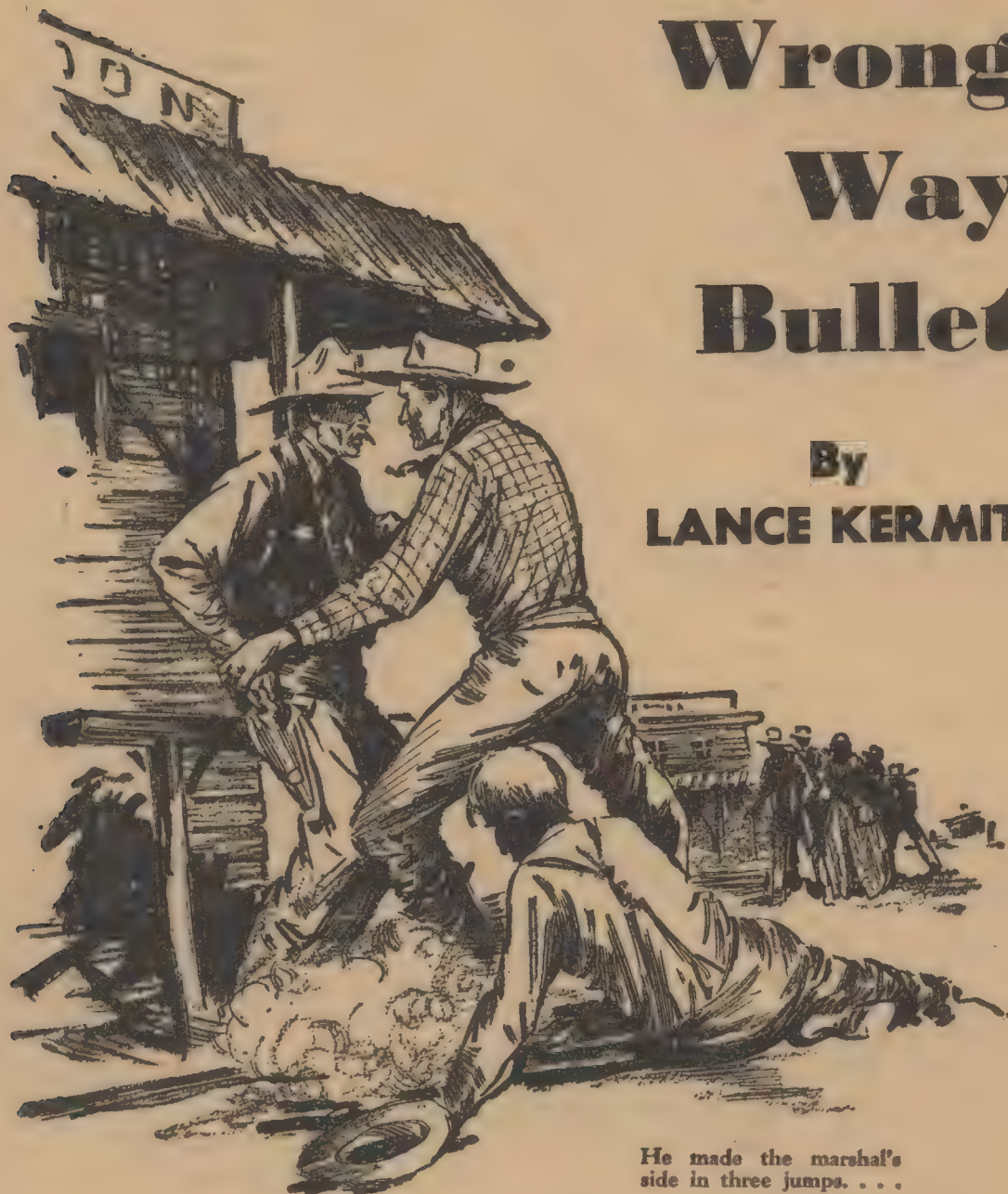
19. What are "twelve-hour leggin's?"

20. When is a man said to be "walking the fence?"

"Right or wrong, mister—we got law in this town," they told Jake Fewster, "and dead or alive—you're gonna prove it to us!"

Wrong Way Bullet

By
LANCE KERMIT



He made the marshal's
side in three jumps. . . .

WHEN Jake Fewster left Rondo the good people of the town shrugged and allowed that it was good riddance. Then the good people forgot all about the large young ruffian, but it is not noted that the good people performed many good deeds in the two

years that elapsed before Jake Fewster returned.

True, Rondo had prospered. The railroad had crept in and out, business flourished, ten saloons opened up and there were eighteen places where a man could gamble to his heart's content. Ace Ma-

graw was brought in and made Marshal so the good people could walk to their businesses, then to the bank, then home to their heavy meals. Magraw killed a few people and Rondo settled down to being a busy, growing community. Young Jake Fewster would scarcely have been noticed had it not been for Magraw.

Old Pop Fewster still had his blacksmith shop, but he had not made his pile despite the prosperity of the town. Old Pop liked to take time off. He was Jake's grandfather—Jake was orphaned by Comanches at the age of two—and he was a great one for sitting beneath a spindling eucalyptus near his open-faced shop and reciting a poem about a spreading chestnut tree and the village smithy to which no one ever listened, the while he sucked on a brown bottle. He was a kindly old cuss and the young men worked for him from time to time when their parents allowed them and thus gained pocket money. Old Pop took the small profit over their labor and drank it up.

Young Jake had gained his muscle while still in his early teens, working over forge and anvil, but it had been too much for him. He was a very large boy and he became a very large young man and once when he sampled Pop's hooch he got into a fight and hurt some people, and that was why he left town.

When he came back, Pop was still under the straggly tree, the forge was banked, there was no business and the shack was filthy. He cleaned it up, shod a couple of horses for two men who happened by and bought Pop a pint instead of his usual quart.

Pop said, "Where you been? She's been askin' for yuh."

Jake Fewster stared at the old man. "Sue Patton? You mean she asked for me? Sue?"

"She was yer gal, wasn't she?" demanded Pop.

"We were just young uns." Jake looked

carefully away lest the old man read his face. He was a blonde young man with curly locks and wide-spaced blue eyes and an open countenance, easily read.

"Her paw made a mint o' money now. Her maw, that narrer-faced Yankee woman, is leader of the Social Society. But Sue drops around and asks about yuh."

Jake said, "I ain't exactly aimin' to court any nice gal."

"You been in jail," pronounced his grandfather. "You been in trouble. I can smell jail on yuh. Shame!"

Jake said, "I been around jails, all right." He was handling one of the discarded shoes he had taken from a brown cayuse that afternoon. It had a built-up toe of special design and he had been at great pains to duplicate it.

Pop went on, detailing the changes in town. He ended, "That Ace Magraw, he's a cutter. Killed Joe Browning. Killed One-Shot Willy Doerr. Don't like him, nohow. He arrested me once for sleepin' on the walk in front of Casey's Bar. Snotty feller. Hard, cold-eyed. Don't like them cold-eyed killer fellers."

Jake said, "Guess the old town's changed. I'll take a pasear downtown and see."

"Pasear, huh? Been in Mexico? Been in a Mex jail? Them's bad jails."

Jake said, "I been around." He bathed at the trough. He put on a checkered shirt and tight, striped pants and low-heeled boots. He knotted a red scarf around his thick neck. The old man peered critically and said nothing. There was still liquor in the bottle.

Downton it was certainly different. Pattons General Store was twice its former size. People gaddied in and out, buzzing like bees. Jake felt lost among all those people. He saw Sue, behind the cage, acting as cashier. She sat on a high stool and he could only see her head and shoulders, but it was enough. He stared a long

while at the dark, healthy good looks of her.

A man moved out of the crowd of shoppers and paused beside the cage. He had a long, swooping mustache and cold grey eyes. He wore a star on his loose, ornate vest. He smiled and spoke warm words. Sue was pleasant to him, Jake thought—maybe too pleasant. That would be Ace Magraw.

Jake moved on. He went into Casey's Bar and Casey squinted, then said, "I be blowed! Jake Fewster! Have one on me, Jake!"

Jake said, "I'll take a beer, Casey. How's tricks?"

"Couldn't be better," said the short, fat Irishman heartily. "Texas Jack Cole will get us all, business is so good." He laughed.

Jake said, "I heard Texas Jack Cole was around with some of his boys. Heard Morgan and Lacey was with him."

Casey said, "Ho! He'll never hit this town. Not with Ace Magraw on the job!"

"Guess not," said Jake. "Although I hear he ain't scared of nobody, neither."

Casey said, "Say, where you been Jake? Know a lot about Texas Jack, hey?" His small eyes were piercing.

"I been around," said Jake. "Have one on me, Casey." He put a gold piece on the bar and drank another cold beer under Casey's distrusting scrutiny. Then he took his change and walked out.

Magraw was gone, so he went into Patton's store. Sue saw him towering over the others. She came out of the cage, arms outstretched. "Jake! You're home!"

He held her hands a moment. He said, "Home. That's the first time anyone's called it 'home.' They say, 'Oh, back again?' Even Grandpa."

"You look fine, Jake." Her eyes were brown and deep and wonderful. "Have

you been gone making your fortune?"

"Not exactly," he grinned.

"What are you going to do? It's so good to see you!"

"I'm working the old forge," he said.

"Oh, you'll find something better. Rondo's a place to make money, now. You'll find a place." Her voice was pleading with him. "You will, won't you?"

He almost whispered, "You haven't changed. I can tell. Many's the night I dreamed you hadn't changed—about me. Then of the day I'd see you married, maybe."

She did not flinch. "I've never changed. I don't know what it is. I don't try to explain it, even to myself. But I've never changed, Jake."

Simon Patton's scowl appeared over the girl's shoulder. He snapped, "Cash, daughter. People are waitin' for their change."

She smiled and slipped behind the cage. Patton stared at Jake. He said, "Humph. Back again, eh?"

Jake said, "Howdy, Mr. Patton. How's Miz Patton?"

Out in the street there was a loud sound. Old Pop's voice cried, "No, yuh don't. My Jake's back, now. Yuh can't shove me around no more."

Jake said, "Oh, Lordy. Pop's got another bottle." He rushed out of the store.

THERE was quite a crowd on the street. Marshal Ace Magraw had Pop by the collar and was kicking him across the street. His cold voice was saying, "I warned you not to come downtown, you old drunk."

Jake inhaled and tried to count ten. Magraw kicked the old man in the shins. Someone laughed. Jake never made it to ten.

The people fell away from him like weeds in a storm. He made the marshal's side in three jumps. He reached

out one big hand. Old Pop came away, leaving part of his collar in the marshal's hand.

Magraw's voice was almost a whisper. "You—you—" His hand clapped at his holster.

Jake had the hand. His muscles swelled. Magraw lost his grip on the gun butt. He found himself shoved against the front of Casey's saloon.

Jake said coolly, "Take it easy, Marshal. Pop'll go along. You can get him fined or jail him. But no kickin.' No manhandlin' of any kind."

Magraw said, "Why, you clodhopper—I'll kill you!"

"No, you won't," said Jake reasonably. "It won't get you anything. And if you try to wallop me, I'll beat out your brains. You just help me get Pop along nice and easy and there won't be no trouble."

There was no one near them. People had scattered for shelter, expecting gunfire. The cold gray eyes met the wide-spaced blue ones. For a moment silence fell over Rondo.

Then Marshal Magraw said, "Some other time, clodhopper. Soon."

"Any time," said Jake carelessly. "But don't trample Pop."

They went down to the jail and Pop sputtered a lot, but seemed content enough in his accustomed cell. They came out onto the walk and Jake said, "I'll pay his fine when the Judge gets ready. Just don't hurt the old coot. He's all the family I got."

"You think you can give me orders, you young fool?" The marshal had good control of his voice, but not his mustache, Jake noticed. The ends of the ornaments to his face trembled.

Jake said, "Hurt him and see what happens." He turned on his heel and went back to the shack. He got out the horseshoe he had copied that afternoon and studied it well. He turned in early, being tired from the work in the smithy.

JAKE paid Pop's fine with another gold piece. Casey was there bailing out a barkeep who had conked a customer with a bottle and saw it. Then the rumor started.

Texas Jack Cole had hit the neighboring town of Goldstrike and got away with \$10,000 in gold. There were, it was said, three men riding with him. One was Morgan, the other was Lacey. But the third was a big man, unknown to crime students, a masked man of prodigious strength.

The people of Rondo gave Jake a wide berth after the word got around. He did not understand it until he met Sue on Wednesday out in back of the smithy. She came over and whistled like a boy, their old whistle signal, and he went out and she was waiting, wrapped in a shawl.

She said, "Jake! They're saying you're one of Texas Jack's men. They say you were over at Goldstrike Saturday after you braced Ace Magraw. And your grandpa talked wild in the jail about how tough you were and how you'd been in Mexico in trouble and what you would do to people."

Jake said, "What do you think, Sue?"

She clutched at his brawny arms. "I don't care what you did. I only care what you're going to do. I know you wouldn't come back here to me and look at me like you did if you were bad."

He said huskily, "Sue, a man don't deserve that kinda faith. No man does."

She said, "My parents won't let me even mention your name. The whole town is talking."

"They always talked about me," he said patiently.

"Ace Magraw says he'll shoot you on sight if you as much as walk down Main Street. He may even arrest you on suspicion. Jake, what are you going to do?"

Jake murmured, "That Ace Magraw talks a lot with his mouth for a real hard man. Me, Sue? I'm goin' to shoe horses."

She said, "Jake, they'll crucify you. That old trouble, and now this. Jake, you'll have to go again. Go somewhere and send for me. I'll come. I swear I will."

He shook his head. "You said somethin'—you said I was home. I'm here. I'm meanin' to stay here a while. I'll be all right, Sue. You're the best gal in the world, don't ever forget that. You go home now and don't fret. I'll be all right."

He saw her to the big Patton house, going around the back way so as not to start a scandal. He saw her go inside and then he saw Ace Magraw, twirling his mustache, going up the front walk. It was not a good thing to watch, but there was a lot of iron in Jake Fewster these days and a lot of patience, and also there was a heap of trust in Sue.

That night Texas Jack Cole hit Rondo. As was his fashion, he cleaned up very well. He got the Patton cafe, the bank and Casey's strongbox. He hit the Wells Fargo station and while his men stood off the few citizens who knew about what was going on he put it all into sacks, distributed it among his men and led the way westward out of town.

Ace Magraw came rushing out, buttoning his trousers, just as the coterie of bandits were riding off. He rushed about, alarming the town, organizing a posse. Not many of the good people in town wanted to fork a cayuse at that hour of the morning, but the saloon hangers-on who were sober enough mounted borrowed nags and went whooping behind the Marshal as he dashed out on the western road.

Jake Fewster learned about it at sunrise, when he was stirring about the old forge. Casey and three or four other bleary-eyed citizens, including Simon Patton, stalked into the smithy and demanded to know where he had been the previous night. They carried pistols and

they looked very angry and dangerous.

Jake worked the bellows and said, "Sleepin'. Seeing as I get up so early I sleep early, too."

Casey said to his neighbors, "I seen this big man plain as day. He had the same build as Fewster, I tell yuh."

Jake looked at the barkeep. He said, "Ah. So Texas Jack was here." He let go of the bellows handle and began to take off his apron.

Simon Patton recklessly waved his pistol and cried, "Don't you start nothin' with us. You're under arrest."

"For what and by who?" asked Jake mildly.

"For ridin' with Texas Jack and by us, said Casey.

"Now ain't you a fine crew of law officers," chided Jake. He walked toward them, rolling down the sleeves of his blue work shirt. They shifted and several tried to get behind their fellows, farther away from Jake. "Which way did you say they went?" Jake asked.

"I didn't say," Simon Patton snapped. "You prob'ly know. But you ain't gonna join them and divvy my money. You're goin' to jail until Magraw gets back here and straightens things out."

"Magraw? I 'spect he led a posse out," mused Jake. "H'mmm. Well, gents, jest get out of my way and let me borrow a hoss."

"He's got a hoss hid out," a voice said. "Don't let him get away!"

PATTON tried to get his gun up, but Jake was too close to him by then. Jake just reached out and took the revolver away and with his left hand he sort of pushed Casey into the crowd and then somehow they were all running, all the good people, scared to death of young Jake Fewster, who stood shaking his head, holding Patton and Patton's revolver.

Jake said in his mild way, "Mr. Patton,

you should know better than this. Haven't you got a good chestnut cayuse over in the livery stable? I seen Sue ridin' him—a little lively for her, I'd say. Hoss looks like it's got bottom?"

Patton gurgled, "If you steal my hoss I'll have you hung!"

"Looks like I might borrow it," sighed Jake.

Sue Patton was running down the street. She held a light fowling piece in her hands and her face was set and white. She stopped dead when she saw her father and Jake. "Thank God!" she cried. "I saw the mob running and I thought they might have harmed you!"

Jake said, "People get excited. Sue, how about me borrowin' that chestnut?"

She said, "My horse? Certainly, Jake. Oh, Jake, you've got to get away. They'll be back. You know mobs! Father, how could you join them?"

Patton said, "He's ridin' with Texas Jack. He wants to join that crew and get his split!"

Jake said, "Take care of your pa, Sue. Did the bandits ride west?"

"You know ding dang well they did. For the Three Peaks, where all you

thieves hang out!" said Patton loudly.

"Uh-huh," nodded Jake. "I'll be seein' yuh, Sue." He stuck Patton's gun into his wide belt. He went into the house and waked up Pop and told him he was taking a trip and why and Pop grunted and went back to sleep. Jake reached out his old carpet bag and got a gunbelt and put it on and then he assembled a rifle and put a box of ammunition in his pocket. Then he went down to the livery stable.

Sue was there and the chestnut was saddled. Sue said, "Send for me, Jake. Send for me. I'll die if you don't."*

He touched her hand with a big thumb and said, "Don't you fret, Sue. Everything'll be all right."

Then he got onto the fine, spirited chestnut and it was amazing the way he fitted the saddle, his back straight, his blonde head covered with a snap-brim old sombrero, so that he didn't look like a village smithy any more. Then he rode. East out of town.

Magraw was in Casey's Bar and half the town was there to hear the story of the chase. The Marshal said, "We never headed them. We went up into the hills and run into a bunch of wild ones and

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10 STORY 25c
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shot it out. Beany Waters got killed. But them bandits weren't there. They got away. That Fewster knows this country, and he rode East outa town. Soon's I get my breath, I'm goin' after him. I know it ain't a city marshal's job, but I want Fewster."

Simon Patton said, "I dunno. My Sue says he didn't do nothin' wrong. She keeps sayin' it and sayin' it, and there's nothin' Maria and me can do can convince her. She says—"

"Jake had gold, didn't he? Before and after the Goldstrike raid," said Casey. "He never had a thin cent before when he was here."

Patton said, "I don't see how him havin' it before the Goldstrike raid makes him guilty."

Magraw said, "He's guilty all right. I shoulda killed him when he interfered with me in the course o' my duty."

The good citizens shouted approval. The barflies who had ridden with Magraw had little to say—they were busy getting over their attack of nerves due to the battle with the outlaws in the hills. Men milled in the bar and talked big all afternoon.

At dark Magraw said again, "I'm takin' the trail East. I want Fewster." His mustache bristled.

"Somebody mention my name?" asked a querulous voice.

Everyone stared at the doors of the saloon. Pop was standing there, swaying a little but glaring at them. "I ain't done a thing and you better not put a hand on me, Magraw," he piped.

The Marshal said, "I'll put more'n a hand on your good-for-nothin' rascal of a grandson when I catch him."

Pop said, "Oh, you will, eh? Well, you better start puttin'. On account of he's comin' in here right now."

Jake came through the rear door. They all had to turn around to look at him as he clomped in. He was dog-weary

and there were holes in his shirt and his pants were ripped. There was blood on his face and a dirty bandage around his head. He carried four heavy sacks in his hands, which he threw on the end of the bar.

He said, "There's the loot, gents." He picked up a bottle of whiskey and took a slug. His eyes brightened a little and he grinned at the assembled citizenry.

With a cry, Casey flung himself on the sacks. Magraw stepped forward and flung out a hand to stop the barkeeper. "This here is evidence," he said in his cold voice. "Where did you come by this loot, Fewster?"

"Halfway between here an' Goldstrike. Texas Jack allus aimed to stick close after a job. He camped in the open, and kept guards posted real careful. Texas Jack was one of the best. Knew more about raidin' than any joker in the West. Smart feller."

"So you went back to him, bush-whacked him, got the stuff and come back to make this grandstand play!" thundered Magraw.

Jake regarded the Marshal with mild interest. "You know, I had an idea you'd say that."

"This town is on to you. You started bad and you aim to wind up smart," said Magraw. His mustache quivered. "But you ain't gettin' away with it, Fewster. You're under arrest! You don't get no reward."

Jake said, "Reward? Didn't even know there was one." He stood there grinning at them. Magraw was advancing toward him. "You folks sure do beat all—"

They were all facing the rear. The shrill voice from behind them, from the front doors of the bar, took them completely by surprise. Pop Fewster was baying at them. "Oh no yuh don't! Git yer hands up, every last man of yuh! Up!"

They whirled to stare. Pop held a

sawed-off shotgun, the deadliest of weapons in hands which did not tremble. He was no longer swaying. He was very sober, a tall, gaunt man with fierce eyes.

They put up their hands. They lined up, leaving Magraw the only one between Pop and Jake. The Marshal hesitated, then his hands also went above his head.

Jake said, "I sure did have to do some killin'. Texas Jack wasn't a man to be taken alive. Yep, I hadda do it. I didn't like to, because I ain't a killer." He paused and looked at Magraw a moment. Then he said, "Couple fellas stopped by the smithy for a shoein' job last week. Didn't wanta be seen too much downtown. So they come to our outa the way place. There was a built-up front shoe and I sorta recognized them fellas. Morgan and Lacey, it was. Then I made a mistake."

Magraw burst forth, "How'd you know them? They were lookin' over Rondo for the raid and you didn't turn 'em in to me?"

Jake said, "Seen pictures of 'em down where I been. And what was the use o' turnin' 'em over to you?"

Magraw said, "Yuh see, men? He's

one of 'em. The outlaws! The big one!"

"I made a mistake," Jake resumed, ignoring the marshal. "When they hit Goldstrike, I thought they'd lay off a week. But Texas Jack was in a hurry and he came in here quicker'n I thought he would. So I hadda borrow a horse and go get him."

"A likely story," said Magraw. "He killed his pardners and brought back the loot so's he could sashay around Sue Patton!"

The first hint of anger was in Jake's blue eyes. He said, "Now this is a dirty thing to do—malign a lady in a saloon! Magraw, you've made several mistakes, but that one did it."

"I'll see you hung!" Magraw's mustaches were doing a dance.

Jake drew a deep, sighing breath.

It was then Casey, behind the bar where Pop could not see him, used what nerve he had mustered. He shot out the lights.

It was the thing Jake had dreaded ever since he had returned. He knew the good people of Rondo. He had been fearful that hurt would come to them before this thing ended.

Prey for both outlaw and lawman, his life was measured by the speed of his draw . . . and the snap of a hangnoose!

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Now he moved away from the bar, crabwise. He did not draw the six-gun on his flank, the revolver which had hung there unused while he fought his long-range battle with Texas Jack and his band the previous night. He saw the swinging doors bat open, then close and he knew Pop had got away all right. He ducked low and ran behind the bar.

There was a lot of caterwauling, but Jake did not hear the voice of Marshal Magraw. Working his way long the bar he reached out big hands to locate the sacks of swag he had brought back.

They were gone.

HE GRUNTED. He moved along, keeping low. Men were shooting off guns, striking out in the darkness at one another. Casey's Bar was a shambles. Jake went out the way he had entered, through the back door.

He kept moving across back ways. He knew the backyards better than the streets, recalling boyhood excursions. He was aroused now to the pitch of his emotions, hastening toward the objective he had picked in advance of the occasion.

He circled the hotel and came to the livery stable, running very fast now. He ducked into the stable and noiselessly faded into a deep shadow. He heard a man panting.

He gave the man time to cool off and stop breathing hard. Then he said in his mild, quiet voice, "It's no good, Magraw. I had you pegged before I came home, even. One Shot Willy Doerr must've had you figured, too. He was always one to know every highbinder in the country. So you shot Willy and shot Joe Browning. They was the two real outlaws around here. They knew about you."

A shoot of fire rasped in the stable, but Jake had moved. Even then he did not draw. He said, from the protection of a feed bin, "No use tryin' to get me that way, Magraw. You're goin' to have to

come out in the open and fight it out."

Magraw's voice said hollowly, "You drivelin' fool!"

"Uh-huh," agreed Jake. "I sure was. I thought Jack wouldn't come in here 'cause you'd given him the map of Gold-strike he needed. I thought Morgan and Lacey came in here just to get that from you. But you're greedy, Magraw. You aimed to cut in on a big pot."

"You'll rot in hell!"

"I coulda shot you then," said Jake. "You better come out."

Magraw said, "You dirty, sneakin'—"

"You musta got a circular, through the mail," argued Jake calmly. "That's how I knew you hadn't turned square, Magraw. If you were livin' decent here and meant to stay so, you'd have come to me with the circular."

Another shot splintered through the edge of the feed bin. Jake said, "You better come outa that stall. If you don't, I'll have t' kill you. Not that it makes much difference, I reckon."

"You'll never get me, you dirty—"

Jake was outside, racing around the barn. When he came in the rear, Magraw was still cursing the place he had recently deserted.

He came down on Magraw's back. He said in the stunned man's ear, "Bool!" His huge hand clamped on Magraw's gun.

The big marshal fought like a tiger. Jake bent the wrist holding the gun. The delicate mechanism would not stand such treatment—Magraw had filed his Colt's to hair-trigger adjustment. There was an explosion.

Magraw sagged in his hands. Jake turned him loose and stepped back. People were running. Lights flared.

Jake stepped out to confront Simon Patton and the others. He said sharply, "Magraw just killed himself. There's your moneybags. Now light a shuck outa here and let's take my prisoners to the jail."

Patton said, "You—your prisoners?"

Jake drew a wallet from his pocket and shoved it briefly in the light of Patton's dark lantern. He said, "And I want plenty of witnesses down at the jail in five minutes."

Patton said, "Texas Rangers? You?"

Jake was already stomping away.

Grandpop Fewster held the shotgun steady. The crowd made a circle, staring at the two prisoners.

Jake said, "This here is Morgan." The two bandits wore masks. "Anybody recognize him?"

Several people allowed that they did, they thought. Jake tore off the bandanna and Morgan was an ordinary looking man of medium size. Someone yelled, "He was in town the other day!"

Jake jerked the other man into view. He was huge. He was bigger than Jake. Someone said, "There's the big fellow you thought was Jake!"

"You thought so too," another cried.

Jake tore off the man's mask. He looked at the other tall blonde man.

Jake said, "Feller does look like me at that!"

Simon Patton said, "Jake, we been wrong. Lemme be the first to admit it, Jake. We didn't know you were a Ranger. You shouldn't blame us too much, Jake."

"I don't blame anybody for anything," said Jake. "If we could just put these fellas under lock and key 'til the Sheriff gets back this way."

The bandits were put away. Simon Patton and Casey lingered. Patton said, "Jake, if you wasn't going back to Texas, if you was aiming to stay, we'd admire to make you marshal."

Jake's voice was soft and smooth. "Well, Simon, I appreciate that. And I accept."

"You do?"

"Yep," said Jake. "Grandpop's gettin' old and the cell discommodates him. I can lock him up at home!"

They all laughed together. It did a lot

to clear the air. Then Patton said, "Uh . . . Sue's waitin' for yuh, Jake. Said to tell yuh to come right on over."

Jake said, "Now do, tell!"

He went to the trough and washed. Patton, watching him, said, "Jake, was Magraw one of the bandits?"

"He rode with Texas Jack. Once you ride with Jack, he never let you go," said Jake solemnly. "He hounded you to your grave. Magraw decided to throw in with him. Magraw was no good, Simon. You could almost tell by those mustaches."

Simon said, "The way they quivered?"

"Yeah," said Jake. He stalked off, Patton a step behind him. If you knew about Rondo people, you could handle them.

Sue was waiting on the darkened porch. When he had settled down with her on his lap she said, "You never even told me you were a Ranger. Didn't you trust me?"

"Honey, I ain't a Ranger any more. That's why I can take this marshal job."

She said, "Oh, Jake!"

"I knew Texas Jack and some of his men and they were good to me. But when he came up here with Lacey and Morgan I got worried about you and Pop."

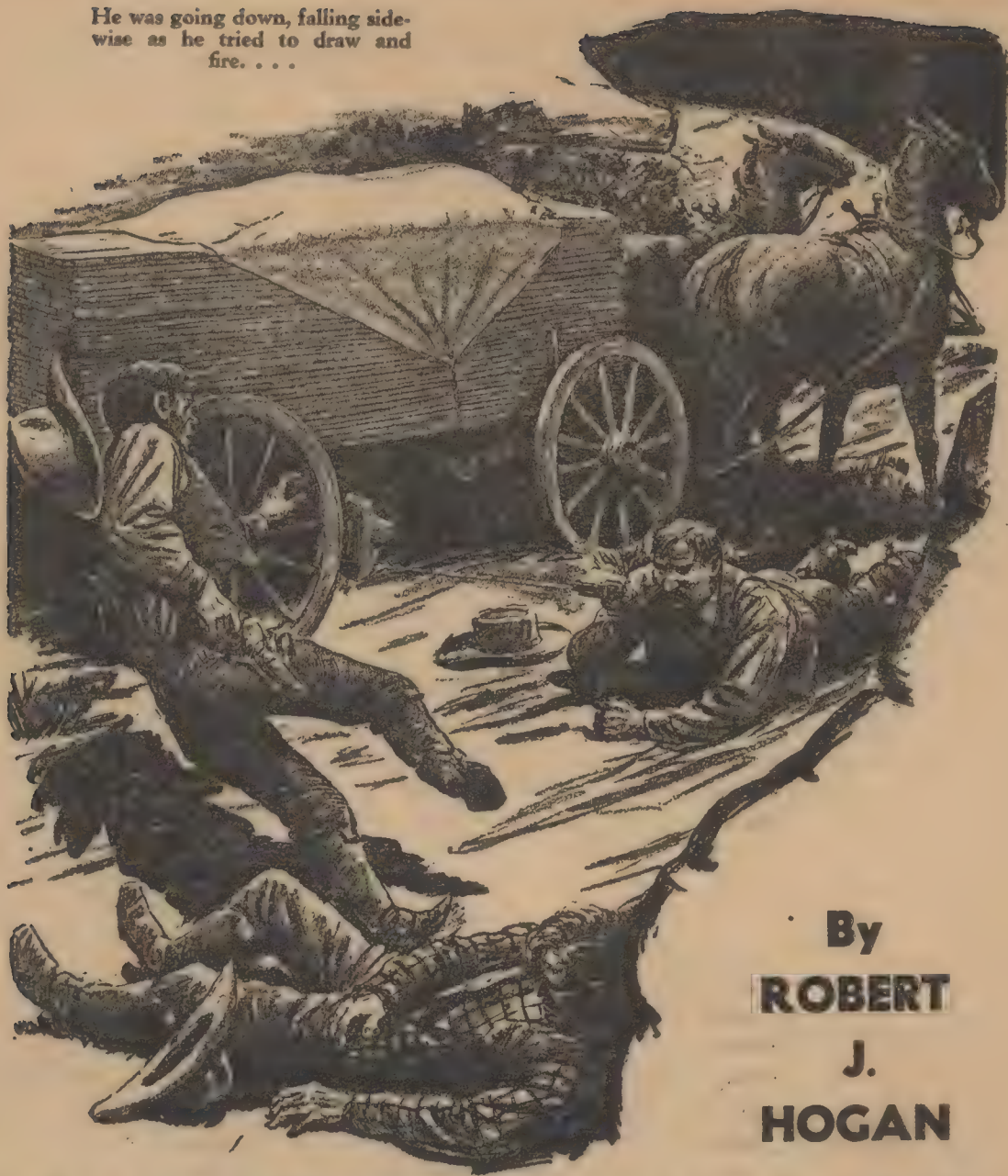
"Lacey and Morgan," he continued, "come to our smithy for some shoein', said they was gettin' a map from Magraw, and that told me a lot. I gave Lacey and Morgan warning to keep away from Rondo, but I marked a shoe on one of their hosses. Hadda kill Jack an' Lacey. They were nice fellers, too."

"Jake," she said helplessly. "You're a case."

"Well, I'll be a better marshal than Magraw," he said reasonably. "And the smithy needs brushin' up. And I've learned to work and enjoy it. I reckon we'll be all right, with that reward money they told me about. You reckon so, Sue?"

She laid her head upon his thick chest. "Jake, I reckon. Anything you say is all right!"

He was going down, falling side-
wise as he tried to draw and
fire. . . .



By
ROBERT
J.
HOGAN

KILLER'S ROAD

"I took this range by being fast with a gun—and that's how I aim to keep it—you can ride on through, go back the way you came—or die right here!"

HE FELT free now that he was far away from the ornery female that had caused him the trouble. He would forget her and all women. He was feeling fine about it when he saw the

woman beside the tent setting the dog on him.

The big dog came snarling, with his back bristling. He was gray, about coyote color, and the size of a collie. He came

with intent to kill or maim, and Bud Peters unbuckled his lariat and drew back to beat off the savage beast if he got too close to his bay gelding.

The woman by the tent was thin and sickly looking. She cried, "Get him, Wolf!" and there was a desperately high pitch to her voice.

The dog was running headlong, doing his best to obey.

Bud Peters reined his gelding about so the dog would come on at their side when he heard another voice from the direction of the tent. A girl, perhaps seventeen, was beside the woman. She was calling off the dog. "Here, Wolf! Wolf, come back!"

The dog charged on, then broke his speed as he came dangerously close to the young rider.

Bud held his lariat, didn't strike. The girl was coming on the run after the dog. She kept calling him to come back.

The dog's barking was less furious, but he was staying close to horse and rider. Once he looked back at the running girl, hesitated.

Bud noted that the girl limped slightly as she ran. He looked at the woman still standing by the tent with the double-barreled shotgun in her hands.

"The hell with getting tangled with women again," Bud said. He moved his legs to gig the gelding, but his spurs didn't touch the horse. His curiosity had the better of him.

"I'm sorry," the girl was calling. "Wolf, you come back here."

She had a sweet face. It was flushed from her running.

The dog stopped barking and turning, trotted back to the girl.

She looked at Bud and her upturned face was the sweetest face Bud Peters had ever seen. It wasn't as pretty as it was sweet and childlike and trusting. At closer range she seemed at least eighteen.

"You see, my mother is nearsighted,

and she thought you were the sheriff or one of his deputies coming to dispossess us."

"That's all right," Bud said. "No harm done."

He touched spur and his gelding turned and started on.

Bud hadn't taken his eyes off the girl. He was going to now, but he saw the sudden flash of hopeless disappointment and he said, "What you being dispossessed for?"

"We're proving up the place," she said. "Others in the county haven't had too much trouble, but they think they can force us off our rights because there's no man to stand up for us."

Bud swore under his breath. He could feel himself being drawn into the clutches of another female.

"Were you going anywhere in a hurry, Mister—"

"Peters," Bud said. "Bud Peters. What you want?"

"We might get the lumber we need for building the house that has to be put up to get title to the land if we could get help with the wagon."

He reined his horse and started toward the tent and the shed that had been set up for the animals behind the tent. The girl walked beside him. "I'm Fern Hadley," she said. "My mother and father and I started out here and father took sick on the way. He died right after we got here. Now I'm afraid mother will get sick if we don't get a house up for her to live in. That's another reason for getting up a house."

"You got no money to buy lumber?"

"Yes, but Matt Greb, who owns the lumber mill at Buster Flats says he hasn't got any lumber to spare, and it's a long haul over the pass to Rimrock. We know we can get lumber there if we can get the wagon in shape to go."

The woman still stood with the shotgun. Her dark eyes followed the stranger. She

glanced then at the girl. "You shouldn't take up with strangers, Fern," she said. "How do you know what this young man—"

"He's kind," Fern said. "He's going to help fix our wagon."

"Oh," said Mrs. Hadley. She convulsed in a hard coughing spell, and went back into the tent.

Bud got down back of the house by the old wagon. He ground-reined his gelding and looked at the wagon where it sagged on the right rear corner. "You got a broke axle-tree," he said.

"We had another one made by the blacksmith," Fern said. "But when we tried to get him to put it in the wagon, he said he was too busy. Not that we blame him. Matt Greb is a pretty powerful man in Buster Flats."

She went to the shed and lifted one end of the heavy iron bar.

"Guess you would have a hard time putting that in, even you and your mother put together," Bud said. "I'll have it together in no time."

"We'll pay you for your time. We've got a little money left."

But was going to say it was all right, then he thought of Dolly back in Aspen, Colorado and he got mad because likely this female was going to put something over on him, too, so he said, "We'll see how long it takes," and went to work.

He talked some, asking questions mostly, as he worked.

"I guess Mr. Greb hopes to get us off so he can put on one of his men and prove up our land," Fern said. "It's a very fertile piece and besides Matt Greb owns places on either side of us."

Bud straightened when he finished. "That sure leaves you in a tough fix," he said. He almost asked if there was anything he could do about it, but he caught himself in time. He said, "I'll be riding along now. Hope you get your place built."

"Thanks," she said. "Can't we pay you?"

"It wasn't much," Bud said. "Good luck." He got in his horse and gighed him into a run to get away while he was strong.

He looked off down the valley at the small clump of trees that marked the town and he said aloud, "Reckon that would be Buster Flats. Got the only trees in the whole valley. We don't like country without trees, do we Buck?"

The gelding nodded his head as he single-footed on toward town.

"If it hadn't been for that danged woman, Dolly, we might have stayed in Colorado where they got trees and pretty scenery."

Buck kept nodding his head.

The rider lifted his voice in song and tried to forget the sad case of Mrs. Hadley and her daughter Fern. He sang:

*Oh, Eve, she was just made for Adam.
Some gal might have loved Sim Legree,
But no woman that's now a'livin',
Better figure she's gonna catch me.*

He sang the song twice at the top of his lungs, and the turtle doves flushed with whistling wings out of the rabbit bush and a city of prairie dogs took shelter in their burrows. Bud laughed all over his long, homely, freckled face and was glad that Fern Hadley hadn't trapped him into helping further.

He thought about the crush he had had on that dancehall girl, Dolly, and the money he had spent on her and how he'd overheard her and the dancehall manager laughing about him. He felt better as he recalled how he had beat up the big dancehall manager just to show them he wasn't all funny.

He raised his voice in song again, got out, "Oh, Eve, she was—" and stopped. Two riders were coming in from a trail to the right. His eyes flashed up the trail,

and he saw that it led up along a mesa of tableland skirting the valley to the south.

THE riders broke their horses into running, and came up on either side of him. "Who are you?" asked the larger of the two.

Bud took his time looking the man over. He was wide in the shoulders and his age bulged out at the middle like the feed bay in a stock barn.

"Who's asking?" Bud asked.

He saw the man's face darken, saw the hand of the smaller man jerk up closer to his right hand gun. The smaller man said, "You'll find it healthier answering Matt Greb's questions when he asks."

The big man turned on him. "Shut up, Kenyon. I'll handle the talking."

Bud Peters waited.

"I asked you a question," Matt Greb said. "You got the answer to *your* question."

"So you're Matt Greb," Bud said and the sight of the man made him mad. There was an arrogant, irritating sureness in him. "I'm Bud Peters."

"That's better," Greb said. "We happened to see you working at the Hadley place. You hiring out to them?"

Bud considered slowly. He felt like taunting the pompous man. "Well," he said, letting it drawl. "I haven't made up my mind yet." He took out papers and pouch and proceeded to build a cigarette.

"You'll find it healthier if you move on."

Bud poured tobacco slowly into a paper, rolled it with a twist of his fingers. Then, something flew close to him and it was Matt Greb's great hand. The hand caught the cigarette and knocked it out of Bud Peters' hands.

"Folks listen to me when I'm speaking to them!" Greb roared.

"I listened," Bud said. He looked calmly at the big man. "I listened real good. You said it was healthier if I moved on.

Well, fact is, I didn't come here for my health anyway. So I reckon you just made up my mind for me. I'm staying."

Bud reined his gelding. The animal reared, turned as he raised on his hind legs. And in the swift move, the gelding's front hoofs came close to striking Matt Greb. Kenyon ducked and when they were composed, Bud Peters sat his horse facing them clean, in good position to draw.

Greb's deep voice barked a command to Kenyon. "Careful!"

Bud's hand was close to the stock of his single gun.

"That," Bud said, "is the smartest word I've heard you say since we met, Greb."

Matt Greb's face went dark purple. Bud could see the big man's gun hand trembling. His teeth clenched and the veins stood out at his temples. "Damn you, whatever you said your name was, I'll kill you for this!"

"Why not try now?" Bud said easily. "There's two of you against one. Or maybe you're afraid those odds aren't enough in your favor. Maybe you'd rather fight a defenseless woman."

The sweat was coming out on Greb's face now and running down over his heavy jowls.

"We'll make a deal," Greb said to Bud. "A hundred dollars to get you out of the country."

"I wouldn't go now for a thousand," Bud said. He waited, then, "Were you gents riding toward town? Because if you were, you'll ride ahead of me."

"You don't have to let him bluff you, boss," Kenyon said. "I can outdraw that homely looking son any time—"

"Now?" Bud demanded. His gun hand flashed and his gun came out in a blur of movement and there it was ready to blaze.

Matt Greb raised his hands and let them shake. "Put that gun away before you hurt somebody, you gun crazy fool!" he yelled.

Kenyon was white. He said, "You win. Put it away."

"Get moving—toward town," Bud said and holstered his gun.

He reined his horse about and put him to a run. He headed for the homestead of Fern Hadley and her mother.

The afternoon was about gone by the time he reached the tent and shed. Wolf came out barking again, but Mrs. Hadley hadn't sent him this time. He wagged his tail now that he knew Bud Peters.

Fern said, "Did you forget something?"

"Reckon so," he said. "I had a little talk with your friend, Matt Greb, down toward town and we talked it over and decided me that I should stay and help you get some of that lumber you've been needing to build your house."

Her face was white and she looked perplexed. "I—I don't understand. You mean Mr. Greb isn't going to bother us any more?"

"Not if I can help it," Bud grinned. "What you looking so pale and scared about? Everything's going to turn out all right."

She came nearer, glanced back at the tent. The sound of Mrs. Hadley's coughing reached them.

"I'm afraid," she said low. "Since you left, mother's been growing worse fast."

"They got a doctor in Buster Flats?"

"Dr. Torren," she said. "He's been out before. I don't dare leave mother to go after him."

Bud grinned reassurance at her. "You got nothing to worry about." He put spurs to his big gelding and headed once more for town.

It was dark when he reached town. The doctor was seeing patients in his office when he got there. He waited and the next time the doctor came out he told him about Mrs. Hadley.

Dr. Torren was a small, agile man with gray hair. He frowned his displeasure. "I can't leave until I finish with these pa-

tients in my office," he said testily.

Bud Peters went back and waited. He saw the next patient go in and the next. He got up and confronted a man with a bandaged thumb.

"What's your trouble?" Bud demanded.

The man looked at him, held up his thumb. "Got to get the bandage changed on this."

Bud went to the woman sitting across the room. "What's your trouble, ma'm?"

"It's my asthma bothering me again. I thought the doctor could give me some medicine that would help me."

Three other patients remained. Bud looked them over. He said, "Anything wrong with you folks that couldn't wait till tomorrow? There's a woman dying up the valley, and I got to get Doc to go see her as soon as he can."

The gaunt man by the door shook his head. "Reckon none of us are like to die right off. Tell Doc to go up."

Bud told Dr. Torren next time he came out of his office. The doctor glared at him, hesitated. He said, "I've got so many things to do here."

"You mean Matt Greb's got you buffaloed too? You owe him money, maybe. Is that it? So he keeps you doing what he says. He'd let Mrs. Hadley die and like it."

Dr. Torren colored. "That's got nothing to do with it."

"Then let's go," Bud said. He touched his six-gun.

Doc Torren glanced at him, turned for his office.

"Get your black grip," Bud said. "We're leaving now."

"Look here!" Dr. Torren snapped. "You can't—"

But Bud had him by the collar and was moving him out. Somebody brought Dr. Torren's bag. They got his team hitched and Bud mounted and rode behind. He shouted for more speed out of the horses.

MRS. HADLEY was wheezing and coughing. The doctor examined her by the lamp light. He shook his head. "I ought to stay all night with her, but—"

"But nothing," Bud said. "You're staying, Doc." He made up a bed under the shed so the doctor could get some rest and there Bud sprawled out on his own blanket and listened to the fitful breathing of the man. Finally, Bud asked, "What's this Matt Greb got on you?"

The doctor made a rattling sound, rolling over on his straw tick.

"I never saw such a strong-willed man," Torren said. "It isn't that he needs the land here or anything that he wants to get. I don't think it's even the fact that Matt Greb is a hog so much as the fact that he seems to become almost insane on getting what he goes after. It's almost like a fanatic game with him, and he's always got to win."

There was a long pause, then Bud asked, "What chance has Mrs. Hadley got?"

"Just a fifty-fifty chance, if that." Torren roused himself. "I'd better go see what I can do for her. This sudden pneumonia works fast. It'll go one way or the other before morning."

The doctor worked hard with her for the rest of the night and by an hour after dawn, Mrs. Hadley had passed the crisis and was resting more easily.

"One thing," Dr. Torren said as he turned to go. "She's got to get out of this tent and into something with a wood floor."

Bud looked at Fern. "Is Matt Greb's lumberyard the only place planking and beams can be bought?"

"Unless somebody can get to Rimrock and back over the pass," she said.

Dr. Torren shook his head. "Greb'll do everything he can to stop that. I heard him say as much the other day in the barber shop."

"How," Bud demanded, "can he get away with all this power?"

"He's a powerful man," Torren said. "He owns the bank, controls money loaned and material sold on credit. I put an addition on my office not long ago. I'll probably have trouble with him if he hears I've been up here telling you these things."

"What about the lawman in the county?" Bud demanded.

"Sheriff Duke Gentry's a good man. A good shot and honest. But he's a poor businessman. Makes a fine sheriff for Greb to back. Greb sees to it that Duke's in debt to him constantly. Duke doesn't dare turn against Greb or he'd lose everything." The doctor turned to go. He lowered his voice with his eyes on Bud Peters. "Confidentially, I'd like to see somebody that could go to Rimrock and get a load of lumber. Greb might be up in the pass with Kenyon or any of his men when the load came back, but I'd like to see someone—like you, Peters—get away with it."

BUD PETERS got the Hadley team hitched to the old wagon he had repaired and got up on the big tarpaulin that he'd rolled up for a seat.

Fern stood beside the wagon holding out the money for the lumber.

"How you know I won't run off with this three hundred dollars?"

"I can tell," she said. "I want you to know that mother and I appreciate what you're doing."

"Forget it," he said and slapped up the team with the reins. He called over his shoulder, "I'll see you tomorrow morning with a load of lumber."

Most of that day he thought about the spot he was in. He'd left Colorado to forget a dancehall girl, and now he was up to his neck in trouble for another girl. He said, "Bud Peters, you're a danged fool if there ever was one. You don't know when you're well off."

He kept talking to himself like that for company during that day and late that afternoon he got to Rimrock. Champ Carr and his men began loading on the lumber that he would need.

He got the load tied down well and covered over with the tarpaulin. He left some of the supplies like nails and tar paper heaped up in the middle toward the front. It looked as if he might be lying there under the tarpaulin, driving the team. He cut the tail end of the canvas tarp off and fashioned a hammock swinging tight under the wagon and he grinned as he said, "A man has to get some sleep while he's traveling. I reckon to take mine in a lower berth."

"You let Matt Greb catch you," Champ Carr said, "and he'll fix you so you won't ever wake up."

One of Carr's men said, "And don't think Greb and some of his men won't be waiting up in the pass for you if he hears you're coming over here for lumber."

"We hope you get away with it," Carr said. "It's only fair to tell you that Matt Greb has boasted he'd kill anyone trading with us. He don't like competition."

"Seems to me I've heard that," Bud said. He started the team.

It was past midnight by the time he reached the tight portion of the pass heading back east. He hadn't felt there would be any danger until he came to the narrow portion where the canyon wedged down to a road scarcely wide enough for a wagon to pass through. From then on, anything could happen.

Bud got into the hammock under the loaded wagon. There he could stretch out and drive with the reins under the wagon box lip.

There was no moon, but the stars were out bright and the night was clear. A man from either side of the rutted road could almost fire at the sound of the shucking wagon and be sure of hitting the driver's place.

The horses plodded along, tired from their long haul both ways. Now and then he clucked to the team to keep them going.

Sometimes the ruts ran so deep that Bud's improvised hammock dragged along the ground.

They moved through the narrows of the pass and on down the slope, and the pass widened some with rolling mountain benches up either side. That would be about the place where the attack would come if it was coming.

Bud lay clucking to the team and wondering how Matt Greb might learn of his trip. He might worm it out of the doctor. But it was more likely that Kenyon or one of his men would be watching from the mesa ridge south of the Hadley place as Greb and Kenyon had been doing that day of his first arrival.

SUDDENLY, a shot echoed against the hills and there was the thud of a bullet into the tar paper roll. Another shot banged in the night and another. The sounds echoed from cliff to mountain peak like a marble rolling down a flight of steps.

Bud drew up the reins easily and the horses stopped without any word from him. They stood still, with drooping heads. They stomped the night insects off their legs. The high horse sneezed in the dust.

Matt Greb's voice said low, "I think we got him, Kenyon."

"Let's go down and see," Kenyon said.

"Keep your guns ready," Greb said cautiously. "He's a tricky son."

Bud, lying under the wagon in his hammock, could hear them, could hear their boots striking rock and thudding on dirt. He could hear them sliding their way down to the rutted road.

"He ain't moving."

"Watch him!"

Bud could see their legs now beside the

wagon. They were both standing on the same side. He eased his gun in its holster. The hammock creaked under him.

"What's that?" Kenyon barked.

"Wagon creaking under the load," Greb said low. "Lift up that tarp and let's see if he's done for."

Bud heard the tarp move. He rolled out of his hammock, landed on his knees and dived for the legs of Matt Greb, who was standing nearest. He made a savage tackle. Greb fell and floundered into his man, Kenyon.

The two men yelled their surprise almost at the same instant. They shouted as if a ghost had come upon them suddenly out of the darkness.

They fell in a heap, all three, with Bud Peters on top, and his lashing right fist caught Matt Greb under the jaw and snapped his big, heavy-jowled head.

"It's him!" Kenyon was yelling. "It's that damned young son!"

Bud felt Greb go limp. He tore at Kenyon, but Kenyon ducked and came up inside the wild rush of the younger man. His head caught Bud's chin and the night sparkled with momentary light.

Kenyon bore in. He had his gun raised and he beat at Bud with it, but he missed by a slight margin.

Bud ducked his attack, came slamming in with his left and then his right and the right landed full and neat and picked up Kenyon almost off the ground. He hurled him back toward the rocks that lined the side of the road. There was a grinding, crunching sound as his skull struck the rocks. His body slumped and he slid into one of the ruts.

"Now I got you," Matt Greb's voice said from behind Bud Peters.

Bud knew in that second that he would be dead in the next. He felt the burn of lead even before it hit him. He was going down, falling sidewise as he made his last frantic effort to draw and fire.

A tongue of flame licked out through

the night for him and his own flame darted toward the wagon rut and Matt Greb dropped on one powerful elbow.

The sting of the lead seared his whole body for a moment, then Bud realized he was standing and had survived.

He stood staring down at Matt Greb. The big man had relaxed in his rut bed. He lay very still, with his eyes open, as if he were counting stars with infinite care.

Bud Peters didn't stop with his load of lumber and the two dead men when he came down the valley past the turnoff to the Hadley place early that morning. He kept going for town and the doctor's office and the sheriff.

He'd done the best job he could on his nicked shoulder. It wasn't bothering him so much now. He could use his left arm almost normally, but while it was numb a few hours before he'd had a job lifting the two dead men onto the wagon and covering them with the tarp.

While Dr. Torren dressed his shoulder, Bud told him what had happened. The doctor finished with the job, saying, "This community owes you a great deal for what you did, Peters. I can tell you the sheriff will be relieved to see this headstrong monster has finished his reign here. Let's go down and see him."

They went out to the wagon, where the two bodies were still under the tarpaulin. Dr. Torren shook his head. He said, "Too bad Mrs. Hadley had to go as a result of Greb's ugly rule. The dampness in that tent finished her after all. And she could just as well have been living in a dry wood house if it hadn't been for—"

"Wait a minute," Bud said. "What's this about Mrs. Hadley?"

"Didn't you know? I thought you must have stopped there on your way down the valley."

"No, I came right through. I didn't want Fern to see the bodies and this shoulder of mine until you had taken care

of it. You say Mrs. Hadley is dead?"

"She took a turn for the worse last evening. Fern rode your horse down for me and we went right back, but she was gone by the time we could get there."

Bud Peters looked at the load of lumber. He got the reins and walked beside the wagon as he drove down to the sheriff's office.

The doctor walked down the boardwalk. He went in first to tell the sheriff. They came out together and the sheriff got the undertaker. There was excitement in the street and a crowd gathered. They removed the bodies and Bud Peters got back on the lumber load and headed up the valley.

Fern Hadley had red eyes, but she wasn't weeping now. She listened while Bud told her what had happened. They stood and looked at each other and then Fern said, "I'm sorry—you had all this trouble—for nothing."

Bud wanted to say, "Now you can build the house and get the deed to the land you were after." But he knew it would sound hollow. So he drove the load of lumber out back and unhitched the team.

Fern came out when he had finished. She said, "You must be in need of sleep."

"I am kind of sleepy," he said. "I'll roll up out here in the shed."

He was asleep almost as soon as he lay down and he didn't wake up until early next morning as the sun peered in at him.

Fern was standing in the shed entrance, just looking at him. "I'll get you some breakfast," she said finally.

He nodded and started to get up. His shoulder was stiff and gave him pain. It eased some after he'd been up a few minutes. He came to the tent and got out his razor and shaved.

"Mother will be buried today," she said. "Will you go with me?"

"Yes."

He washed his face and looked at her standing in the tent opening.

Suddenly, as if the hardship and trouble of the valley had been too much for her, as if she wanted to run off somewhere, she asked, "Where did you come from?"

"Colorado," he said. "You'd like it there if you like forests of tall trees and snow-capped mountains and clear streams with trout." Then before he considered what he might be getting into, he said, "I don't reckon you'd want to stay here now, alone. Reckon you could sell the lumber for a good price in town and head back to Colorado with me."

Her eyes grew damp and she turned back into the tent.

Bud Peters went out to the shed and got a cleaner shirt out of his saddle roll. He talked to himself as he put it on. He said, "You're a danged fool, Bud Peters, getting free of one woman and getting snarled up with another." But the words were just words and he didn't seem to care about taking his sermon to heart. He said, "You see, you lost control again. Now you go down to the old lady's funeral and you stand with her there and then you get on your horse and ride on out of this forsaken country."

They stood close together beside Mrs. Hadley's grave and Bud Peters held Fern's hand all the time. Then they turned and walked down the little hill from the cemetery.

Some of the town folks said kind things. It was the sheriff who put his thoughts into concrete shape. He said, "Peters, the county owes you considerable. We hope you'll stay."

"Thanks, Sheriff," Bud said, "but you see, I just rode over from Colorado to see the country, and I got to be getting back. Been promising Fern I'd show her around if she'd go back with me."

He glanced down at her. She was too full of her sorrow to trust her voice, but she gave him her answer. She pressed his hand.

Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 105)



1. True. A horse is said to "crawfish" when it pitches backwards.

2. "Haze the talk" means to direct the talk along certain lines.

3. According to the cowpoke's way of thinking, the term, "iron," means either gun or branding iron.

4. If the ranch boss sent you out for a "knobhead," you should return with a mule.

5. If an outlaw left town "with a nine in his tail," this would indicate he left in a hurry.

6. True. The call "more straw" is used to ask that more calves be brought to the branding fire.

7. False. A "neck reiner" is a horse that responds to pressure of the reins at the neck.

8. True. In parts of the West, the chaparral cock is known as a "Paisano."

9. If the ranch boss sent you for a "palomino," you should return with a "golden" color horse with light mane and tail.

10. An Easterner would be the more likely of the two to ride on a "postage stamp." Postage stamp is a slang expression for the English saddle.

11. "Remudera" is the Mexican name for the bell mare.

12. If a cowpoke told you to meet him in the "rincon," you should meet him in a certain nook or enclosed place which he indicated. Rincon is from the Spanish and means "corner."

13. False. A running brand definitely can be made with a running iron.

14. "Scratching gravel" means to force a horse to climb a steep incline.

15. If you were sent to a "skookum house," you would be in jail on an Indian reservation.

16. True. In the language of the Westerner, a "sourdough" is a bachelor. Sourdough is also a slang term which is sometimes used in reference to the cook.

17. True. According to cowpoke language, "swing a wide loop" means to steal cattle. The term also has other meanings in parts of the West.

18. False. "Turn-out time" is generally in the spring—not in the wintertime. It refers to the time when cattle are turned out to grass.

19. "Twelve-hour leggin's" are chaps.

20. A man is said to "walk the fence" when he nervously paces up and down. The term, applied to men, has been borrowed from a like expression applied to livestock animals which walk up and down a fence in an effort to break through.

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 81)

told his people what had happened. The white man was never again to be trusted. He was only to be killed.

Fate also favored the plans of the crafty Apache chieftain. Civil war between the states broke out, and hundreds of troops were recalled. The frontier was poorly defended. Cochise went on the warpath.

The settlers fought back as best they could, but they were no match for the tricky Apache. Always the end was the same. Cochise and his followers slipped away, and vanished like shadows in the face of morning. The frontier begged for protection, but help was not forthcoming.

Then out of the smoking wake of the Civil War, back to the wasteland of Arizona, back to the wild country he loved, rode Captain Tom Jeffords. He was six feet tall, and the red blood in his veins was no brighter than his bushy beard. From Leavenworth, Kansas, to Denver to New Mexico he drifted about.

After several futile efforts to rehabilitate himself, Tom Jeffords eventually found himself operating the old Butterfield stage route. It was then that he learned of Chief Cochise. He carried the scars of many Apache arrows on his body. One day in 1867, after a brush with Cochise's raiders, he saddled his horse, and set out for a pow-wow with the Apache ruler.

High in the Dragoon Mountains, Indian lookouts watched the lone white man struggle upward, claw at the ragged rocks, slip and fall, and begin again, foot by foot. Inside the natural fortress of rock, the cunning Cochise squatted. Presently a runner brought word of the white man's coming.

"Alone?" the great chief asked.

The Indian nodded silently, and swung the Springfield forty-five-seventy caliber rifle—loot from a raiding party—in readiness across his chest. Cochise saw the

BULLET BARGAIN

movement, and his voice rang in the rocky cavern. "No! Let him come."

THE dark-faced braves fingered the triggers of their rifles, and clutched the long hafts of their war-lances as they watched the red-bearded man labor up through the rocks to where Cochise was seated. Without a word, Tom Jeffords handed his rifle, his pistol, and his hunting knife over to an Indian squaw. In silence he sat down at the feet of the mighty Apache chief.

Tom Jeffords looked steadfastly into the dark, unblinking eyes of the Indian chief, but he did not flinch nor turn away. Down the mountainside a wild turkey screamed, and a faint breeze rustled the dry branches of a juniper tree. Still Tom Jeffords uttered not a word. He knew the Indian customs; he knew the Apaches, as the arrow scars in his body testified, and he knew, too, that one false move meant sudden death. He waited the long, silent moments out, and finally the Indian chieftain nodded gravely. Only then did the tall, red-bearded man speak.

"My name's Tom Jeffords." His voice seemed unreal here, high in the mountain fastness. "I have come for a treaty-talk."

"It is well," Cochise's guttural voice boomed. "It is well."

"Twenty-two of my men have been killed in sixteen months by your raiding parties." Tom Jeffords continued, "and the government mail coaches between Mesilla, Fort Bowie, and Tucson have been looted and robbed. I've come up here, Cochise, to spend two days with you, and talk things over."

The Apache chief answered angrily, "The white man has driven the antelope from the mountains; he has stolen our land and poisoned our waterholes. He has lied and cheated us, and killed our young men. Since I went on the warpath, none of these things happen to us. I kill them

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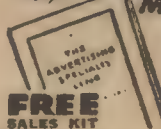
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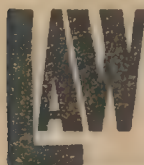
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

all. How do you know you will ever see your own campfire again?"

Tom Jeffords knew if he said the wrong thing, he would be instantly killed. He hadn't one chance in ten thousand of getting free if he offered to fight.

"Between brave men there is always honor," he murmured softly.

The glint of hate no longer dimmed Cochise's eyes.

"It is well," he said. "It is well. We talk."

That night there was feasting in the secret headquarters of the Indians up in the Dragoon Mountains. There was roast antelope, sweet meal of ground hackberries, and a delicacy the Indians called *beyotas*, the Indian name for acorns, their favorite food. Then, in the weird camp light of the Apaches, a peace treaty was signed.

A hunting knife flashed in the half-light, and there was blood on Cochise's arm. It was caught in an urn. Again the knife touched flesh, the white skin of Tom Jeffords. Blood oozed from the gash, and dripped into an earthen cup. Then they drank the red blood, the mixture of red man's blood and white man's blood, and now they were one.

"Blood brother of Apaches," Chief Cochise intoned to Tom Jeffords, pledging peace forever.

Tom Jeffords' stages were never molested again, and the mail was never touched. However, it was a different story with the other white men. Cochise continued to harass them at every opportunity. The situation became so intolerable that in 1872, President Grant sent General O. O. Howard to make peace with Cochise on the chief's terms. But the quick-striking Cochise was too elusive, and General Howard could not even get close enough to communicate with the Apache leader. Finally General Howard called upon Tom Jeffords, and together

BULLET BARGAIN

the two men entered the rock-walled stronghold of the Apaches. For eleven days they stayed there, smoking clay pipes and talking peace.

"Can this man's word be depended upon? Cochise asked his blood brother as departing time drew near.

"I don't know," Tom Jeffords answered, "but I believe so."

"It is well," Cochise said. "My people do as you say."

For two years, while all Arizona was seething with Indian trouble, the Apaches under Jeffords held their peace.

One hot June evening in 1874, the great Cochise called his blood brother to his side. His deep voice was unusually grave when he spoke.

"My blood brother, tomorrow I shall die—at ten o'clock, I think. Do you believe we shall meet again?"

"I don't know," Tom Jeffords said.

"I think so," the feeble words barely came to Cochise's lips. "I think we shall."

Oddly enough, Cochise died the next day at ten o'clock, fulfilling his strange prophecy. Before he died, Apache warriors carried their beloved chief high into the Dragoons, so he could see the sun rise over the mountains to the east. When the last breath of life had left his body, Apache tribesmen stripped themselves of their moccasins, their loincloths, their antelope skins, and burned them in a huge pile. In the spirit world into which their majestic chief was entering, he would never lack for sufficient clothing. And from dawn until dusk the Indians galloped their mustangs up and down the canyon where Cochise was buried, beating out every trace of his grave.

To this day no one knows precisely where the great chief is buried. Only Tom Jeffords knew the exact burial ground, but he never revealed the secret during the forty years he survived his friend.



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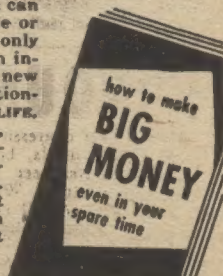
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